

EXHIBIT B-3

Baked Alaska Is More than Just a Yummy Dessert

I wake up in my bedroom with bandages on my neck and face and shoulder—and absolutely no memory of how I got here.

Macy is sitting cross-legged on the end of my bed, my uncle is standing by the door, and a woman I assume is the school nurse is hovering over me. With her waist-length black hair, bloodred nails, and stern face, she looks nothing like any nurse I've ever seen, but she's got a stethoscope around her neck and a roll of bandages in her hand.

“See, Finn, here she is. I told you the sedative wouldn’t knock her out for long.” She smiles at me and, though it is open and inviting, she still manages to look intimidating. I think it’s the long, beak-like nose, but it could also be the medicine she said she gave me. I’m awake, but I still feel really fuzzy, like nothing is quite as it appears.

“How are you feeling, Grace?” she asks.

“I’m okay,” I answer, because nothing hurts. In fact, everything feels warm and floaty right now.

“Yeah?” She leans over me. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Three.”

“What day is it?”

“Tuesday.”

“Where are you?”

“In Alaska.”

“Good enough.” She turns to my uncle. “See, I told you she was going to be okay. She lost some blood, but—”

“Jaxon!” The warm, floaty feeling melts away as I struggle to sit up. I don’t know how I could have forgotten. “Is he okay? He was...” I stop when I realize I don’t have a clue what to say next. Because I don’t have a clue what actually happened up in that tower.

I remember Jaxon kissing me...and probably will for the rest of my life.

I remember the earthquake.

I remember running, though I don’t know why.

And I remember blood. I know there was blood, but I can’t figure out why.

“Don’t push so hard,” the nurse tells me with a pat to the back of my hand. “It’ll come if you don’t try to force it.”

It doesn’t feel like it will come. It feels like everything’s a blur, like my synapses just aren’t connecting the way they should.

Exactly what kind of sedative did this nurse give me anyway?

“Macy?” I turn to my cousin. “I—”

“Jaxon’s fine,” she assures me.

“He saved you,” my uncle tells me. “He got you to the nurse, Marise, before you could bleed out.”

“Bleed out?”

Marise is the one who answers. “When the window shattered, flying glass nicked an artery in your neck. You lost a lot of blood.”

“My artery?” My hand flies to my neck as terror sets in for the first time. That’s how my mother died. An arterial bleed-out before the ambulance could arrive.

“You’re fine,” my uncle says, his voice low and soothing. He reaches for my hand, pats it a few times. “Thankfully Jaxon was there. He slowed the bleeding and got you to Marise’s office before...”

“Before I died.” I say what he won’t.

My uncle turns white. “Don’t think about that now, Grace. You’re fine.”

Because Jaxon saved me. Again. “I want to see him.”

“Of course,” Uncle Finn agrees. “Once you’re up and about.”

“No, I’d really like to see him now.” I start kicking at my covers, which feel like they weigh a thousand pounds. “I need to make sure he’s okay. I need...” I trail off. I don’t know what I need, except to see Jaxon. To see his face, to touch him, to feel him breathe and know that he’s really okay.

And also because I’ll go out of my mind if I don’t find out how he feels about the kiss we shared. Soon.

“Whoa, now.” Marise puts a firm hand on my shoulder and pushes me back down against the bed. “You can see Jaxon tomorrow. For now, you need to stay here and rest.”

“I don’t want to rest. I want—”

“I know what you want, but that’s not possible right now. You’re weak.” The stern look is back, and it has multiplied times ten. “I don’t think you realize how serious this injury is. You need to recuperate.”

“I know exactly how serious an arterial bleed is,” I insist, my mother’s face floating behind my eyes for a few seconds before I manage to blink it away. “I’m not planning on snowboarding down the side of Denali. I just want to see my...”

I break off because I was about to call Jaxon my boyfriend and no, just no. One kiss does not a boyfriend make, even if it was the best kiss of my life. Maybe even the best kiss in the history of the world. I mean, until the glass started flying.

I try to play it off by picking at my comforter, but Macy's wide eyes tell me I'm not doing a very good job of it.

All of a sudden, Marise and Uncle Finn are studying me a lot more closely, too, though neither of them makes a comment about my slipup. Instead, Marise simply pulls my comforter back over me and says, "Behave or I'll give you another sedative. And this time I'll make sure it knocks you out for several hours."

The threat is real—I can see it in her eyes—so I don't push to see Jaxon any more. Instead, I settle back against my pillows and do my best impression of a good little patient.

"I'll behave," I promise. "You don't need to give me a sedative."

"We'll see," she harrumphs. "You need rest, and it's my job to make sure you get it. How that happens is completely up to you."

"He's okay," Macy reassures me when I don't say anything else. "I promise, Grace. He's just busy right now cleaning up the mess in the tower."

Oh, right. Arterial bleeds aren't exactly tidy. "Is it bad?" I know it's ridiculous, but I'm embarrassed that I bled all over Jaxon's tower, that I caused all this fuss for so many people. "Does he need help?"

"I've got it covered," Uncle Finn assures me dryly. "Thankfully the earthquake only caused minimal damage throughout the rest of the castle, so all my people are up in Jaxon's room."

"You're sure?" It's a question for Macy, not Uncle Finn. I don't know why I'm being so insistent, except there's this feeling deep inside me that something isn't quite right. That Jaxon is in trouble somehow. It's probably just the medicine messing with my head, but I can't seem to shake it. I need to know for sure that he's all right.

"I swear, Grace." She reaches over from her spot at the end of the bed and squeezes my hand. "Everything is under control

with Jaxon. He's fine, his rooms will be fine soon enough, and no one else was hurt in the earthquake. You can relax."

It's hard to imagine relaxing when fear is still a tight ball in the pit of my stomach. But it's not like I have a choice with everyone hovering over me.

Though it's the last thing I want to do right now, I relax back against my pillows. Maybe if I start being more compliant, Marise and Uncle Finn will leave me alone for a while.

"Are you thirsty, Grace?" Marise asks after a moment. "Do you want some juice?"

For the first time, I realize I *am* thirsty. Like, really, really thirsty. Like, can't remember the last time I needed a drink this badly thirsty. "Yes, please. Or water. Anything would be good."

"Let's start with a little cranapple juice. The sugar will be good for you, and then we'll go from there."

"Why do I need sugar?" I ask, even as I accept the small bottle she hands me. I drink it down in one gulp and pretend I don't see the look she exchanges with Uncle Finn.

"Can I have another?"

"Of course." A second bottle appears in her hand, though I would swear she didn't even turn around. I'm too thirsty to care, though, so I take it with a murmured thank-you. I try to drink it more slowly but end up chugging this one, too.

When I'm finished, Uncle Finn takes the bottle from me. Then he strokes a hand over my hair in that way that always makes me think of my dad and says, "I'm sorry, Grace."

"For what?" I ask, confused by the words and the pained look on his face.

"First the altitude sickness, now an earthquake. I brought you to Alaska because I wanted you to feel safe, wanted to help you find a new home. Instead, you've been miserable since you got here."

“I’m not miserable,” I tell him. When it looks like he doesn’t believe me, I reach for his hand. “I mean, Alaska is about as different from San Diego as it can get, but that doesn’t mean I hate it here. I thought I would, but I don’t.”

I start out meaning to reassure him, but the more I say, the more I realize I mean every word. Alaska does feel alien, but if I didn’t come here, I wouldn’t have met Jaxon. I wouldn’t have had that incredible kiss. And I wouldn’t be living with my cousin, working on a friendship that I’m pretty sure is going to last the rest of our lives.

“Besides, the altitude sickness is gone. And we have earthquakes back home, too, you know.” I grin. “It’s pretty much the one thing Southern California and Alaska have in common.”

“Yeah, but I should have given you more of an introduction to Katmere Academy. I guess I thought ignorance would keep you safe.”

“I don’t think a tour of the school would have stopped me from getting hurt in an earthquake, Uncle Finn.”

He smiles a little sadly. “That’s not what I mean.”

My radar, fuzzy as it is, goes off again. “What *do* you mean, then?”

“He means that, like any school, it takes a little time to learn the ropes here,” Marise interjects, and the look she gives my uncle tells him now is not the time to discuss those ropes. “I’m sure Macy will help you out with a lot of it. Plus, you’re a smart girl. I think you’ll be fitting in here in no time.”

I’m not so sure, but I’m not about to argue with her. Not when doing so will just keep her and my uncle here longer.

Instead, I change the subject, hoping covering the last of my medical stuff will move them along. “What about my other cuts?” My hand goes to my cheek and the bandage there. “Are they bad?”

“No, not at all. They’ll be healed in no time, and none of them was deep enough to leave a scar.”

“Except on my neck.”

“Yes.” She sounds reluctant to admit it. “You will have a small scar on your neck.”

“Better than the alternative, I guess.” I smile at her. “Thanks for taking care of me. I appreciate it.”

“Of course, Grace. You’re a model patient.”

We’ll see if she still thinks so after I sneak out of my room tonight to go to Jaxon’s. I want to see him, want to make sure he wasn’t hurt, too. And I want to know how he feels about our kiss, if he’s still thinking about it—or if he’s decided I’m just too much trouble.

I also want to know what happened between the glass breaking and me getting to the nurse’s office, and he’s the only one who can tell me. I hate that I can’t remember anything. It makes me feel completely out of control, and I can’t stand that feeling. It gets my anxiety up, so much so that I’m sure I’d be on the verge of a panic attack if it weren’t for the sedative.

“Is it okay that I’m still so sleepy?” I ask, not because I actually want to take a nap but because I want everyone to stop hovering. Especially my uncle.

“Of course,” Marise tells me. “It will probably be tomorrow morning before all the sedation wears off.” She turns to my uncle. “Why don’t we head out, Finn? Give Grace a chance to rest. I’ll come back and check on her before bed and, in the meantime, I’m sure Macy will get us if there’s any problem.”

“Of course I will.” Macy gives her father the most virtuous look I have ever seen on her face or any other. If I weren’t so impressed, plus desperate for Uncle Finn to leave, I’d probably burst out laughing.

“How about you?” my uncle asks, stroking a hand over the

top of my head. “You okay with us leaving so you can get some sleep?”

“Of course. It feels rude to sleep while you’re here, but I’m just so tired, Uncle Finn.” Turns out Macy isn’t the only one who can lay it on thick.

“Okay, then. I’ll head out. Macy, why don’t you come with me? You can grab some food for you and Grace from the dining room before Marise leaves.” He looks at me. “You must be hungry.”

I am, actually, now that he mentions it. Starved, actually. “I would love something to eat.”

“Nothing too heavy,” Marise warns. “Some soup and maybe a pudding to start with. If that stays down, we can talk about something a little more substantial.”

“Of course.” Macy sends me a reassuring look, then loops an arm through her father’s. “Come on, Daddy. Let’s go get Grace that food before she falls asleep.”

My uncle walks out right behind her, and I tell myself I have to remember to do something really nice for Macy to pay her back for her help with him. Doing her laundry for a month, maybe, or cleaning the bathroom the next several times.

After they leave, I’m a little nervous about being left alone with the nurse, but she seems content to let me “doze,” and I’m prepared to take full advantage of it. Now that the sedative has worn off some, I feel like I’ve been run over by a snowplow... twice. I’m sure it’s just because of all the blood loss, so I’m not worried. But it still feels gross.

A few minutes go by in silence, but Marise must figure out I’m not actually napping because she asks, “Do you have any more questions about your condition, Grace?”

“No, I’m good,” I answer. But then something occurs to me. “Actually, I was wondering how long before you take the stitches out?”

“Stitches?” She seems baffled at the question, which doesn’t make any sense at all.

“For the arterial tear? You did stitch it up, right? Or is that just something they do on *Grey’s Anatomy*?”

“Oh, right. Of course.” Now she just looks uncomfortable. “The stitches I used on the artery will melt away, so no worries there.”

“And the ones on the outside? That closed the wound?”

“They’ll dissolve, too,” she tells me.

Her answer strikes me as odd, but I’m not a nurse, so I’m willing to go with it. At least until she continues. “Keep that cut covered, by the way. Come to me tomorrow and I’ll change the dressing for you, but don’t uncover it on your own for at least a week.”

“A week? What about when I take a shower?”

“I’ll give you some waterproof film you can put over the bandage. It will keep it dry, even when you’re washing your hair.”

Seems like a lot of work for a wound that is supposed to heal normally, but I’m not going to call her on it. At least not yet. Instead, I simply say, “Thanks.” And this time when I close my eyes, I actually try to fall asleep.

It doesn’t work, though, because no matter how drowsy I am, something just doesn’t feel right here, including the fact that a school nurse sewed up my artery...and then seemed shocked at the mere mention of stitches. Where I come from, doing stitches is a doctor’s job, pure and simple.

Then again, this is Alaska, and we are ninety minutes from the closest hint of civilization. It probably stands to reason that the school nurse at Katmere can do a lot more than an average school nurse. Maybe she’s a nurse practitioner and that’s why she can prescribe sedatives and fix arteries.

Either way, I’m grateful when Macy finally gets back. I keep

pretending to be asleep until Marise leaves, but as soon as the door closes behind her, I spring up in bed.

“What aren’t you telling me?” I demand of my cousin, who screams and nearly drops the tray she’s carrying.

“I thought you were asleep!”

“I wanted to make sure Marise left.” I throw back my covers and swing my legs off the side of the bed so that my feet are on the floor.

“You need to lay back down,” Macy admonishes.

“*I need* to find out what really happened to me,” I counter. “I mean, what are the odds that the window would shatter like that during an earthquake and that the flying glass would actually nick my artery? It seems like a long shot. And then Marise told me not to look at the cut. What is that?”

“She probably just doesn’t want you to freak out about it being ugly or something.”

Macy sets the tray down on her desk, but she doesn’t turn around to face me. Instead, she fusses with the dishes on the tray until I want to scream. After all, there’s only so much prep a bowl of already heated soup needs.

Which is why I push to my feet, ignoring how light-headed I feel, and start to walk over to her. The room begins swaying before I’m halfway there, though, and I put a hand on the wall to steady myself.

Just a small nick, my ass. I’m in seriously bad shape here.

Macy turns around and shrieks all over again when she sees how unsteady I am. “Get back in bed!” she orders, grabbing my arm and throwing it over her shoulders. “Come on, I’ll help you.”

“Tell me the truth. Did my artery really just get nicked or is there something they’re not telling me?” I ask, refusing to let her move me until I get some of my questions answered.

“Your artery was nicked. I saw the blood myself.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Yeah, but that’s all I know. I wasn’t there when Jaxon brought you to the nurse, you know. I was at dance practice.”

“Oh, right.” I sigh, fighting the urge to pull out a chunk or two of my hair. “Sorry. I just feel like something is off about this whole story.”

“I don’t know, Grace. It makes sense to me. Although I do feel like you have the worst luck ever. That tree branch breaking and now the window. It’s weird.”

“It *is* weird. That’s what I was thinking earlier. I mean, the odds are way skewed. I just don’t know what to think about it.”

“Right now? You don’t have to think about anything that doesn’t involve crawling back into your bed and getting some sleep. Marise would kill me if she saw you up wandering around the room.”

“And what’s up with that?” I demand, even as I let Macy help me to my bed. “She’s, like, the scariest school nurse anywhere.”

“She’s not so bad. She’s just...serious.”

I snag the pencil bag off my desk on my way by. I’ve got a mirror inside, and I want to get a look at the damage. “Yeah, that’s one way to describe her.”

“What kind of soup do you want?” Macy asks as she settles me down into a bed whose sheets seem a lot smoother than when I climbed out of it. Which makes no sense, considering Macy has been across the room the whole time.

“Hey, did you fix this?”

“What?”

“My bed. It was a mess when I got out of it.”

“Oh, yeah. I, uh...” She moves her hand horizontally in a kind of smoothing motion.

“When?” I must be more out of it than I think. I didn’t even

see her come over here.

“I did it when you were leaning against the wall. You had your eyes closed for a minute, and I didn’t want to disturb you while you were getting your bearings.”

Again, that doesn’t seem right. I was sure she came directly over to me once she realized I was standing. Then again, I’m the one who’s totally drugged while she’s the one who has all her faculties about her. Besides, what does it matter anyway? It’s not like my bed made itself.

“Well, I appreciate it,” I say as I pull back the covers over me. “So thanks.”

“No worries.” Still, she looks a little white as she reaches for the food tray. “I brought potato, chicken noodle, and corn chowder. I didn’t know what kind of soup you like.”

“Honestly, I’m hungry enough that I’ll eat anything. Pick what you want and give me whatever’s left.”

“Umm, no. You’re the sick one.”

“Exactly. I’m so drugged, it won’t matter. Besides, tomato soup is pretty much the only kind I really don’t like, so just give me something.”

In the end, she hands me the corn chowder and a bowl of canned fruit—peaches this time.

I end up scarfing down half the bowl in three minutes flat. Macy eats at a more sedate pace, taking a couple of bites and then asking, “Hey, why exactly were you in Jaxon’s room anyway? Last I heard, he was avoiding you.”

The last thing I want to do is tell Macy about how I was crying. I don’t want her to worry about me, and I definitely don’t want her thinking that she hasn’t been wonderful since I got here, because she has. “We were talking, and he offered to show me the meteor shower.”

“The meteor shower? That’s the best you’ve got?”

“It’s the truth. It was gorgeous. I’ve never seen one so bright before.”

She still looks skeptical. “And how exactly were you watching this meteor shower from inside his bedroom?”

“We were on the parapet *outside* his bedroom. We’d just crawled back through the window when the earthquake hit.”

“The earthquake.”

“Yeah, the earthquake. You know, that whole *ground shaking* thing that happened about five thirty this afternoon. It must have been an aftershock from this morning.”

“Oh, I know about the earthquake. We all felt it.”

“So why are you acting like I’m losing it?”

“I’m not. I was just thinking... I mean, it’s probably silly. But what exactly were you and Jaxon doing when the earthquake hit?”

I freeze at the question, my gaze fastening on the wall directly behind her ear. But it doesn’t really matter where I look, because I can feel my cheeks heating up.

“Oh my God. Were you—” Her voice drops. “Were you *hooking up* with him?”

“What? No! Of course not!” Pretty sure my cheeks just went from pink to bright red. “We were...”

“What?”

“Kissing. He was kissing me, okay?”

“That’s it? Just kissing?”

“Of course that’s it! I met the guy less than a week ago.”

“Yeah, but...it seems like it would have to be more than that.”

“What does? I mean, I’m not even sure he likes me.”

Macy starts to say something but must think better of it, because in the end, she just shakes her head and stares down into her soup like it’s suddenly the most interesting thing on the planet.

“Seriously?” I implore. “You don’t get to do that. I answered

all your questions. You need to answer mine!”

“I know. It’s just—” She breaks off as a knock sounds at our door. Of course. “It’s probably my dad wanting to check on you again,” she says as she climbs to her feet. “He’s not very good at waiting on the sidelines, especially when someone he cares about is sick.”

I put what’s left of my soup on my nightstand and burrow down under my covers. “Will it offend you if I pretend to be asleep? I’m really not up for talking to anyone else right now.”

“Of course not. Fake sleep away. I’ll let him get a good look at you, and then I’ll kick him out.”

“Best. Roomie. Ever.”

I close my eyes and roll onto my side—face toward the wall—while Macy goes to answer the door. I can hear a deep murmur from whoever is on the other side of the doorway, but I can’t understand the words.

It must be Macy’s dad, though, because she answers, “She’s fine. She just had some soup, and now she’s sleeping.”

More murmuring from that deep voice and then Macy offering, “Do you want to come in and see for yourself? Nurse Marise gave her a lot of medicine. She’s still drugged to the gills.”

There’s a little more murmuring, not much. And then Macy closes the door.

“Coast clear,” she says, but her voice sounds a little off.

“Hey, I’m sorry if I made you feel like you had to lie to your dad. If you want to call him back—”

“It wasn’t my dad.”

“Oh. Who was it, then? Cam?”

“No.” She looks a little sick as she admits, “It was Jaxon.”

I spring up in bed for the third time tonight. “Jaxon? He was here? Why didn’t you let him in?” I throw back the covers and climb out of bed, searching the room for my Chucks, but they’re

nowhere to be found.

“I did invite him in. He’s the one who declined.”

“Because you told him I was sleeping.” I give up on the shoe hunt and head for the door.

“Where are you going?” Macy squeaks.

“Where do you think?” I pull open the door. “After Jaxon.”



No Harm, All Foul

I charge out of our room, figuring I'll catch Jaxon a few doors down. But the hallway is completely empty. Still, he couldn't have gone far, so I take off toward the main staircase. Worst-case scenario, I know where his room is, even if a cleaning crew is currently in there.

I finally find him on the stairs, taking them three at a time. He's not alone, though—Liam and Rafael are with him, and all three of them seem like they're in a really big hurry.

I should probably let them go, but he's the one who came to my room, not the other way around. Which means he wanted to see me.

It's that thought that galvanizes me, that has me calling out his name as I move to the top landing.

He stops on a dime. All three of them do, and then they're all staring at me out of the same blank eyes. I have a second to try to absorb the direct impact of all that male beauty and intensity—it's a lot—before Jaxon is bounding back up the stairs.

Liam and Rafael watch for a second, their faces locked in that expressionless look I'm coming to hate. But then they both give me a little wave, plus Rafael adds a thumbs-up, before they

turn away and bound down the stairs.

“What are you doing out here?” Jaxon demands, and just that quickly, he’s in front of me. Only his face isn’t blank. It’s livid with a mixture of self-loathing and regret, his eyes an incandescent black that has shivers sliding through me for all the wrong reasons.

“Macy said you were looking for me.”

“I wasn’t looking for you. I came to make sure you were okay.”

“Oh.” I hold out my arms, do a little self-deprecating shrug.
“Well, as you can see, I’m fine.”

He snorts. “Pretty sure that’s a matter of opinion.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means, you look like you’re going to fall down any second. I don’t know what you were thinking to come running down the halls after you nearly bled to death. Go back to bed.”

“I don’t want to go back to bed. I want to talk to you about what happened this afternoon.”

“Blank” doesn’t describe what happens to his face. It goes beyond blank, beyond empty, until there’s absolutely nothing there. No sign at all of the Jaxon I watched the meteor shower with. Definitely no sign of the boy who kissed me until my knees buckled and my heart nearly exploded.

He looks like a stranger. A cold, emotionless stranger, one who has every intention of ignoring me. But then he finally answers. “You got hurt. That’s what happened.”

“That’s not all that happened.” I reach for his arm—I want to touch him, feel him—but he steps out of reach before my fingers can so much as brush against his shirt.

“It’s the only thing that happened that matters.”

Ouch. My heart falls straight to my feet as I struggle with the fact that he’s grouping our kiss in with all the things he thinks *don’t* matter.

For long seconds, I don't know what to say. But then I ask the one question that's been burning inside my brain since I woke up. "Are *you* all right?"

"I'm not the one you need to worry about."

"But I am worried about you." It's a lot to admit—especially when he's working so hard to shut down everything between us—but that doesn't make it any less true. "You look..."

His eyes meet mine. "What?"

"I don't know." I shrug. "Not okay."

He looks away. "I'm fine."

"Okay." It's obvious he doesn't want to talk to me right now, so I take a step back. "I guess I—"

"I'm sorry." It sounds like the words are dragged out of him.

"For what?" The apology astounds me.

"I didn't protect you."

"From an *earthquake*?"

His gaze swings back to mine, and for a second, just a second, I can see something in his eyes. Something powerful and terrible and all-consuming. But it's gone as quickly as it came and then he's back to showing nothing. "From a lot of things."

"From what I understand, you saved my life."

He snorts. "That's the point. You don't understand much. Which is why you should go back to your room and forget all about what happened earlier."

"Forget about the earthquake?" I ask. "Or forget about you kissing me?" I don't know where I got the guts to bring it up... except, truth is, it's not bravery so much as desperation. I have to know what Jaxon's thinking and why he's thinking it.

"Forget about it all," he answers.

"You know that's not going to happen." I reach for him once more, and this time he doesn't jerk away. Instead, he just watches me as I rest my hand on his shoulder, hoping the contact will

remind him of what it was like to touch me. Hoping it will break through the barriers he's erected between us.

"Yeah, well, it needs to happen. You have no idea what we just did."

"We kissed, Jaxon. That's all we did." It felt momentous, important—it still feels that way to me—but in the grand scheme of things, it really was just a kiss.

"I keep telling you that it doesn't work like that here." He shoves a frustrated hand through his hair. "Don't you get that? You've been a pawn since you got here, a chess piece to move around the board to get the desired result. But now...now we've upped the stakes. This isn't just a game anymore."

He might mean his words as warnings, but they feel like body blows.

"I was a game to you?"

"You're not listening." His eyes glow incandescent with the effort of holding in emotions I can't even begin to decipher—no matter how much I wish I could. "From the moment I kissed you. From the moment you got hurt, everything changed. You were in danger before, but now—"

He breaks off, jaw clenching, throat working. Then says, "Now I've all but put a bull's eye in the middle of your back and dared someone to take a shot."

"I don't understand. You didn't *do* anything."

"I did *everything*." He moves then, swift as one of those shooting stars from last night, until his face is right up in mine. "Listen to me. You need to stay away from me. I *need* to stay away from you."

His words send a chill through me, make my mouth go dry and my palms sweat. And still I can't just walk away. Not when he's standing right here. "Jaxon, please. You're not making any sense."

“Only because you refuse to understand.” He backs away. “I have to go.”

The words hang in the air between us—dark and somber—but he doesn’t go. He doesn’t do anything but stand there, staring at me with tortured eyes.

So *I* do something. I step forward until our bodies are just barely brushing against each other.

It’s not much, but it’s enough to have heat pooling in my stomach and electricity crackling just below my skin. “Jaxon.” I whisper his name because my vocal cords have forgotten how to work. He doesn’t answer me, but he doesn’t move away, either.

For one second, two, he just stands there looking down at me, his gaze locked with mine. His body pressing forward into mine.

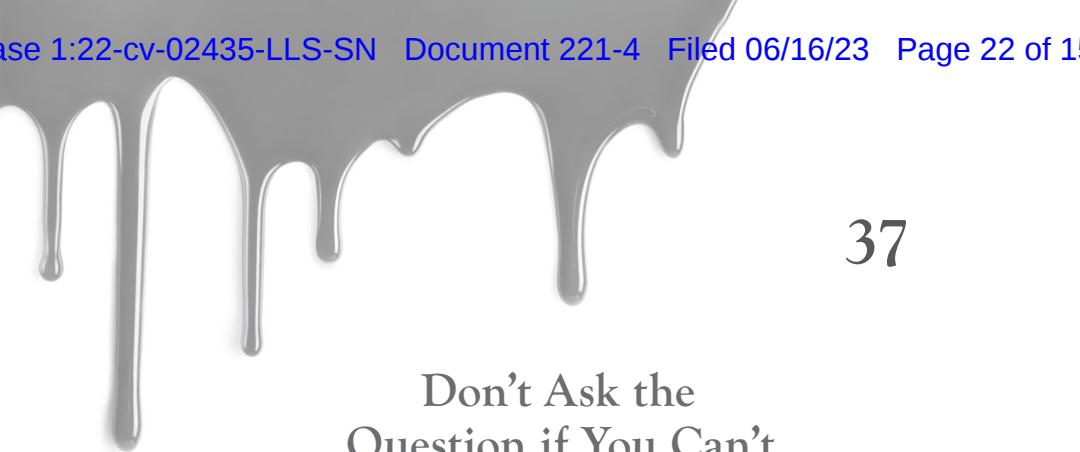
I whisper his name again, and it’s almost enough. I can see him waver, feel him lean more heavily against me.

But then he snaps out of it, his voice cutting like broken glass as he tells me, “Stay away from me, Grace.” He turns away, takes the steps three at a time, and doesn’t stop until he’s on the landing ten feet below. Then, without turning around, he calls up to me. “It’s the only way you’re getting out of this school alive.”

“Is that a threat?” I ask, more shaken than I want to admit—to him or to myself.

“I don’t make threats.” The *I don’t have to* hangs in the air between us.

Before I can respond, he puts two hands on the iron banister and vaults straight over it. I let out a strangled scream, rush to the edge of the staircase, half afraid I’ll see his mangled body down below. But not only is he not lying broken on the ground three stories below, he’s nowhere to be seen at all. He’s vanished, right into thin air.



Don't Ask the Question if You Can't Handle the Answer

I stand, staring down at where Jaxon should be but isn't for several seconds. He couldn't have just disappeared. It's impossible.

I start down after him—the same way—but I've barely made it four steps before someone is calling behind me. “Hey, Grace! Where are you going?”

I turn to see Lia coming across the landing toward me. She's dressed in all black, as per usual, and looks totally badass in a chic, feminine way. Also as per usual.

“I wanted to talk to Jaxon, but he's too fast for me.”

“No news there. When Jaxon doesn't want to be caught, he's too fast for everyone.” She rests a hand lightly on my shoulder. “But, Grace, honey, are you okay? You don't look so good.”

I'm pretty sure that's the understatement of the year, so I just kind of shake my head. “It's been a weird day. And a long one.”

“It always is when Jaxon is involved,” she tells me with a laugh. “What you need is a little more of my tea and some girl time. We should arrange that for later.”

“Yeah, definitely.”

“In the meantime, maybe you should go after Jaxon.

Otherwise who knows how long he'll brood."

I think about it, I really do. But I have no idea where he went—or even if he's still in the castle. And if he's not inside, it's not like I can exactly go chasing after him in my pajamas.

Which is why, in the end, I just kind of sigh and say, "I think I'm going to go back to my room for now. Maybe try to text him."

"Oh, yeah, of course you *could* do that." She sounds a little patronizing, but it could just be that I'm pissy. Which is why, when she says, "Here, let me help you back to your room. You look like you're going to collapse at any second," I try not to be annoyed.

I *feel* like I'm going to collapse at any second, but I figure that's no one's business but my own. Especially in this school, where physical weakness seems like a character flaw.

Which is why, instead of answering her, I cast one more look down the stairs after Jaxon—to no avail—before turning to walk back the way I came. Lia seems to think I'm going to fall at any moment, though, because she walks right next to me, hand up like she's prepared to catch me if I fall. Which I absolutely am not going to do. I've caused enough trouble this week to last a lifetime.

"So what's going on?" she asks as we slowly make our way back to my room. "I thought I'd see you at dinner, but you weren't there."

"Oh, yeah. I had a little...accident."

"I can see that." She eyes the bandages covering too many of my visible surfaces. "Anything serious? Because you look like you went three rounds with a polar bear. And lost."

I shake my head with a laugh. "A little flying glass from the earthquake earlier, no big deal."

"Oh, right. The earthquake." She studies me for a second. "You know, we've had more tremors since you got here than

we've had in the last year. I'm beginning to think you brought them with you, California girl."

I snort. "Yeah, I've already had that discussion today. But I have to tell you, I never got hurt like this from a quake in California."

"Oh yeah? Well, you know what they say about Alaska."

"North to the Future?" I respond, quoting the state motto I found online when I was researching this state.

She laughs. "More like, everything here is designed to kill you in ten seconds or less."

"I thought that was Australia?"

"I'm pretty sure it works for any place that begins and ends with an A." She grins, but there's a bite to the words that reminds me just how bad things can get here. I may have fallen out of a tree and gotten cut by some glass since I got here, but Lia lost her boyfriend. And Jaxon lost his brother.

"How are you doing?" I ask as we get closer to my room.

"Me?" She looks startled. "You're the one who's all cut up."

"I didn't mean physically. I meant..." I take a deep breath, blow it out slowly. "About Hudson. How are you doing?"

For a second, just a second, rage flashes in her eyes. Towering, unadulterated, infinite. But then she blinks, and it's replaced with a bland, pleasant expression that is somehow a million times worse than the fury beneath it.

"I'm doing all right," she says with a strange little smile that makes me ache in sympathy. "I mean, I'm not good. I'll never be good. But I've figured out how to say no, so that's something."

"To say no?"

"Yeah, we talked about this before. Everyone wants me to just move on, and I can't. They tell me that nothing has to change, that Jaxon's a perfectly good replacement—"

"Jaxon?" My whole body tightens up at the mention of his

name linked with hers. She can't be serious...can she?

"I know. It's absurd. He and Hudson are nothing alike. And I don't care about politics or family dynasties even if he does. I just want Hudson back."

I'm reeling under the news that she and Jaxon are supposed to be together—and the implication that *he's* willing to go along with it. But she looks so small when she says it, so exposed, that my heart twists for her.

Besides, it doesn't make sense. Not with the way he held me earlier. Not with the way he kissed me. He didn't do either of those things like a guy who had another girl on his mind. He did them like a guy who was as desperate for me as I was for him.

Yeah, he tried to take it back on the stairs a few minutes ago, but you can't just take something like that back. Not when I've never felt anything close to it before in my whole life, and I would swear he never had, either.

So what's all this about, then? What's Lia getting at? And why is she talking about it to *me*, of all people?

I don't have answers to those questions and, more than likely, I'm not going to find them standing in the middle of the dorm hallway. Especially not when the combination of sedative and blood loss is still fogging up my brain, making me feel like half my body isn't even here.

On the plus side, we're finally back at my and Macy's room. I'm exhausted and more than ready to be back in my own bed. I'm also more than ready to be away from Lia, at least until I figure out if I'm being paranoid or if she's trying to subtly warn me off Jaxon because she considers him hers.

If that is what she's doing, it isn't going to work. Not when I already feel this connection to Jaxon. It's strange, I know, considering we've spent as much time sniping at each other as we have talking, but the more time I spend with him, the more

time I want to spend. Like there's something pushing me toward him, making me want him. There's not a chance her subtle little speech about how everyone wants her and Jaxon to be together because of *family* reasons is going to change that.

I reach up to knock—I was in such a hurry to get to the incredible disappearing Jaxon Vega that I forgot my key—but the door flies open before my fist can so much as touch the wood.

“There you are!” Macy exclaims. “I was just about to come looking—”

She breaks off when she sees Lia standing behind me. “Oh, hi, Lia.” She nervously smooths her hair down. “How are you?”

“Good,” Lia tells her dismissively before turning back to me with a concerned look on her face. “Rest up, okay, Grace? I’ll come by to check on you tomorrow. Bring you a special blend of tea that will help you feel better faster.”

“You don’t have to do that.” I cross through the beaded curtain into my room. “But I appreciate you walking me back. Thanks.”

“Of course. And the tea is no bother.” She smiles sweetly. “Get some rest.”

“I will. Thanks.” I don’t bother to smile.

“Thanks for bringing her back. I appreciate it,” Macy tells her with a grateful smile that gets my back up.

Lia ignores her. “I can bring the tea by now if you want it, Grace.”

“I’m good.” I wave a dismissive hand at her as I flop down on my bed. “I think I’m just going to sleep.”

To prove my point, I lie down on my freshly made bed (again) and turn so I’m facing the wall, my back to the door—and Lia. I know it’s rude, but right now, I don’t actually care. I’m so done with this conversation, and for the moment, I’m done with Lia, too. Not just because of the Jaxon thing but because I really don’t

like how she treats Macy. I can't stand how abrupt she is with her, like my cousin is some annoying puppy nipping at her shoes.

There's some soft murmuring from the door—my cousin apologizing to Lia for my churlish behavior, I'm sure—and then the door closes softly.

I roll over right away, and as I do, I come face-to-face with the bag of cookies and fresh glass of juice Macy has put on my nightstand.

"You really are the best cousin in the world," I tell her as I sit up. "You know that, right?"

"I do," she agrees, settling down on the bed next to me. "How are you feeling?"

"The truth?"

"Always."

"Awful. I should have listened to you." But it's ridiculous. And I hate it. All I did was run down the hall after Jaxon, and my body feels weak, exhausted.

"No shit." She reaches for the glass of juice and holds it out to me. "Drink up, buttercup."

For the first time, I can't help thinking about how much blood I must have actually lost.

It's that thought that has me taking the glass from her and downing the juice in a couple of swallows. It's what also has me eating a cookie even though my stomach is roiling and food is the last thing I want.

Macy watches me like a hawk, then smiles her approval when I manage to choke down a second cookie as well as a glass of water. Only then does she ask, "So are you going to tell me how you left here chasing Jaxon and came back with Lia?"

"Not much to tell. Jaxon did what he always does."

"And what's that?"

"He disappeared."

Macy nods. “Yeah.”

I think about the look on Jaxon’s face when I was trying to talk to him at the top of the stairs, then I think about what Lia just let “slip.”

I think about the way Jaxon has managed to help me every time something bad happens to me. And I think about how he finds it so easy to walk away, time and time again.

It’s enough to have my already addled brain begging for mercy.

“We should get some sleep,” Macy says and, for the first time, I realize she’s already in her pajamas. “It’s after two.”

“It’s really that late? How long was I out?”

“Long enough.” She gives me a hug before crawling off my bed. “Get some sleep. We’ll talk more about the ins and outs of Jaxon Vega’s brain tomorrow.”

I nod and try to do as she suggests. But I can’t stop thinking about how late it is. And about how much time I’ve lost. I must have been out a lot longer than I thought if it’s really—I pick up my phone to check the time—2:31 in the morning.

There are a couple of messages from Heather—about how much Calculus sucks and how she wishes she could work up the nerve to talk to Veronica (her current crush). I shoot back a couple of texts of my own. Nothing about my most recent near-death experience, just encouragement about Veronica and Calculus. Plus a little whining of my own over Jaxon.

She doesn’t answer—probably because it’s the middle of the night. So I spend a few minutes scrolling through my Insta feed. As I stare blankly at the pics, I can’t help thinking about this afternoon. Can’t help wondering what happened in the time I was so out of it.

Was it exactly as Marise said? That Jaxon rushed me to her office and she drugged me so she could repair the “nick” in

my artery? Or is there something more to the story, something that accounts for why my uncle was so nervous and Jaxon so determined to put distance between us?

It's these thoughts that have me staring at the ceiling until nearly three in the morning.

These thoughts that finally have me heading to the bathroom and closing the door between Macy and me.

And it's these thoughts that have me peeling back the bandage I promised I wouldn't lift for at least a few days and staring at the cut on my neck.

Or, more precisely, at the two perfectly round, perfectly spaced puncture marks about an inch below a jagged cut.

Nothing Says “I Like You” Like a Fang to the Throat

Needless to say, there's no going to sleep after that.

There's no doing anything except checking and rechecking my throat about a thousand times in the next two hours as I wait for the last of the drugs—and what I'm hoping is some kind of bizarre hallucinogen—to wear off.

Because if this isn't some drug-induced hallucination, then nicked arteries and aliens are the least of my concerns.

Part of me wants to get up and go for a walk to clear my head, but memories of what happened the other night are still fresh. After the day I've had, and what I just saw in the mirror, I'm pretty sure I'm going to lose my shit completely if anyone tries to hassle me tonight. Especially when a glance out the window reveals that the moon is still high in the sky.

Not that that should matter in a normal world, but “normal” has pretty much been a distant memory since I set foot in this place. Just the thought has me running my fingers over the bandage on my neck, my mind racing all over again as I try to figure out what could possibly have caused the puncture marks on my neck.

I mean, sure, if I was living in a horror novel, there would

be an obvious explanation for those perfectly placed, perfectly spaced punctures. But I'm not Bram Stoker, and this isn't Transylvania, so there has to be another reason.

A snake? Two shots to my neck? A really mean practical joke? It has to be something. I just haven't figured out what it is yet.

The fact that I can't help but remember Jaxon's warning about the full moon and his sneered comment about Marc and Quinn being animals doesn't make it any easier to be logical. Nor do Macy's warnings that Flint and Jaxon come from different worlds, that they're just too different to ever get along.

It has to be the drugs, right? It has to be.

Because what's skating around the edges of my mind is totally absurd. Completely bonkers. There are no such things as monsters, just people who do monstrous things.

Like this.

If Marise didn't give me a couple of shots in the neck, then this *has* to be a practical joke. Jaxon *has* to be messing with me. He has to be. There is no other reasonable explanation.

This is the idea I hold on to all through the next couple of hours, the mantra I repeat to myself over and over and over again. And still, as soon as the clock on my phone hits six a.m., I'm up and in the shower—being careful, as instructed, not to get the bandage on my neck wet.

After all, what do I know about vampire bites? The last thing I need to do is aggravate the thing...

Not that this is a vampire bite or anything. I'm just saying, at this point I'm taking nothing for granted.

After I'm dressed in a black skirt, black tights, and purple polo shirt this time, I arrange my hair so it covers both my neck bandage and the cut on my cheek, grab my lined hoodie, and sneak out of the bedroom before Macy's alarm even goes off. Part of me wants to wake her up and ask her the question burning

itself indelibly within my mind, but I don't want her to lie to me.

I'm also not sure I want her to tell me the truth.

Jaxon, on the other hand... If he lies to me, you'd better believe I'm going to stake him through his fangy black heart. And yes, I know that makes no sense. I just don't happen to care at this exact moment.

I march through the school like a woman on a mission. The fact that I'm also still a little dizzy—just how much blood did I lose, anyway?—makes things particularly interesting, but there's no way I'm lying around in bed, waiting to talk to him, for one second longer.

I make it up to the tower in about five minutes flat, which pretty much has to be some kind of record, considering it's all the way at the other end of the castle. But when I rush through the alcove to pound on Jaxon's door, there's no answer.

I keep pounding, and when that doesn't work, I text him. And call him. And then pound some more. Because this can't be happening right now. He can't really not be here when I most need answers from him.

Except apparently he can. Damn it.

Frustrated, pissed off, and more worried than I'd like to admit, I drop down on one of the overstuffed chairs in his reading alcove and stare at the now-boarded-up window that started all this so I can pretend not to notice that the rug that was here yesterday is now gone.

Then I lean back and prepare to wait Jaxon Vega out.

Fifteen minutes later and I'm pretty much climbing the walls. Half an hour later and I'm firing off more than a few obnoxious texts to the raging jackass. And forty-five minutes later, I'm contemplating burning down the whole freaking tower...at least until Mekhi walks in, sleepy-eyed and amused.

"What are you smiling at?" I demand none too politely.

“You look cute when you’re grumpy.”

“I am *not* grumpy.”

“Oh, right. You’re pissed off beyond belief and more than capable of ripping Jaxon’s fat black heart out of his chest and stomping on it?” He quotes my most outrageous text back to me, I assume to embarrass me. But I am beyond being embarrassed. I mean, I have fang marks in my neck. *Fang marks.*

“Exactly,” I answer with a glare. “Not to paraphrase Sylvia Plath or anything.”

“Not to paraphrase her *badly*, don’t you mean?”

“Keep it up and I’m going to get pissed off at you, too,” I add. He smiles, but before he can say something that makes me want to punch him in his ridiculously pretty face, I demand, “Where’s Jaxon? And why is he hiding from me? Or showing you my texts?”

“He’s not hiding from you.”

“Oh, really?” I walk over and ceremoniously knock on his door. Once again, there’s no answer. “Pretty sure he is.”

“Really? And why would he be hiding from you exactly?” Mekhi crosses his arms over his chest and grins at me, brows raised and head tilted.

“Because of this.” I reach up and rip the bandage off my throat, turning my head so Mekhi can see what I saw.

I take a perverse kind of satisfaction in watching the grin drop from his face. In watching his eyes widen and his face go slack with shock. “What the hell! Who bit you?”

Oh God. My stomach revolts, and for a second, I think I’m going to throw up as nausea washes through me. He didn’t deny someone bit me. He just asked *who* bit me, like it’s perfectly normal that I have two puncture wounds on my neck.

Like it’s perfectly normal that there might be someone or, judging by his question, a *lot* of someones at this school who walk around biting people.

Fear skitters up my spine at the implication, has the hair on my arms and the back of my neck standing straight up.

“Grace?” Mekhi prompts when I’m too busy trying not to hyperventilate to answer him. “Who bit you?”

“What do you mean, who?” I nearly choke on the words. “Jaxon bit me. Obviously.”

“Jaxon?” He shakes his head, a little wild-eyed. “No, I’m pretty sure that’s not how that went down.”

“What do you mean? Of course it is. I was up here, got cut by glass, and Jaxon bit me. I’m sure of it.”

“You remember that happening? Just like that? You remember him biting you?”

“Well, no.” I’m pretty sure I’m as wild-eyed as he is at this point. “But if it *wasn’t* him, then who the hell was it?”

“I have no idea.” He pulls out his phone and fires off a series of texts.

My head is swimming. Because of everything he’s said *and* everything he hasn’t. The only things that bite people are animals and— No. I’m not ready to go there yet. Not ready to actually think the word. My brain might explode.

“I swear to God, if you’re messing with me, Mekhi... If this is all just some great, big practical joke you guys cooked up, I’m going to *murder* you all. Like, disembowel you while you’re still alive and feed your entrails to whatever poor, starving polar bear I can find. We’re clear about that, right?”

“Crystal.” His phone vibrates with several return texts, and his face gets even more grim as he reads them. “It definitely wasn’t Jaxon.”

The shiver along my spine turns into a violent chill, one that makes it hard for me to think. Hard for me to breathe. “How do you know he’s not just saying that?”

“Because Jaxon doesn’t lie to me. And because he is currently

freaking the fuck out.” His phone buzzes again, and he reads the newest messages before continuing. “He wants you to sit tight. He’s on his way back. He’ll be here in a few hours.”

“On his way back?” My head is actually threatening to blow up. Like, it seriously might just explode right here, right now, and then it won’t matter who made these marks on me or why. “Where exactly did he go?”

“The mountains.”

“The mountains? You mean *Denali*? ”

Mekhi doesn’t look at me when he answers. “Farther than that.”

“Farther than... How much farther are we talking about here?”

He shakes his head. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t you tell me not to worry about it.” I poke him in the shoulder. “I’m the one with fang marks in my neck from some asshole’s practical joke, and Jaxon is the last one who saw me besides the medical professional. So I’m going to worry until he gets back here and explains this to me. Okay?”

“Okay, okay!” He pretends to rub the spot I poked. “Jeez, woman. You definitely know how to make your point.”

“Yeah, well, you might want to pass that along to your mountain-traversing friend. And by the way, why aren’t you freaking out that I have fang marks in my neck?”

“*I am* freaking out! Jaxon’s freaking out. We’re all freaking out.”

“Yeah, but you’re freaking out because you don’t know *who* bit me. You’re not freaking out because—oh, I don’t know—*someone bit me!*”

“Oh yeah.” He shoves his hands in his pockets, looks anywhere but at me. “I think I’m going to leave that for Jaxon to explain.”

“Because he’s just so talkative.”

I'm completely fed up with both of them at this point, not to mention the entire situation, so screw it. Just screw it. I push off the chair and head for the door.

Except Mekhi gets there before me—the boy sure can move fast when he wants to—and blocks my path. “Hey. Where are you going?”

“Back to my room to get my stuff. I have class.” And a cousin who I am totally prepared to torture the truth out of if I have to. I move to go around him, but he shifts to block my path.

“I told you Jaxon wants you to stay put. Just...I don’t know, grab a book and a blanket and curl up by the fire.” He gestures to the empty fireplace.

“There’s no fire.”

“I’ll build one. It’ll take me five minutes, I promise.”

“Mekhi.” I speak slowly and in the most reasonable tone I can manage, but I can see that just makes him warier. Smart boy.

“Yes, Grace?”

“If Jaxon wants me to stay put, maybe he should have done the same. As it is, he’s on some mountain God only knows where doing God only knows what, and I’m here with inexplicable *fang* marks in my neck that happened when I was *unconscious*.” The terror is back, so I focus on the anger. It’s so much easier to deal with. “I assume you can see why I don’t actually give a *damn* what Jaxon wants right now.”

“Um, yeah. I absolutely can see that.” He gives me the grin that I’m sure normally gets him everything he wants in life and more, but I refuse to cave. Not now and not over this. “How about we compromise? You go back to your room and chill until Jaxon gets here. That way you’ll be safe, and then you two can figure this out together.”

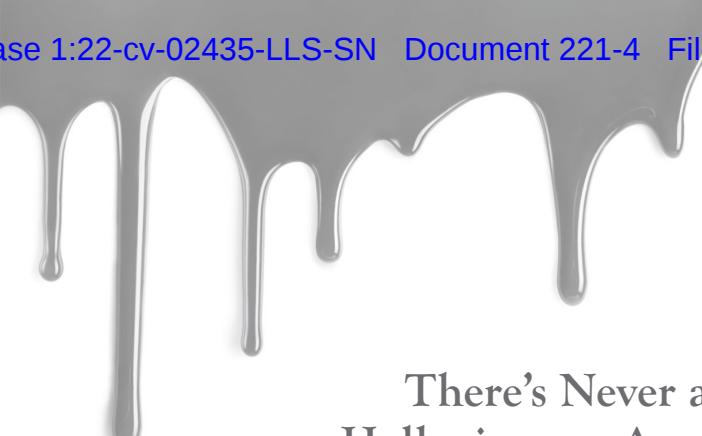
“You really think I need to hide from some moron with a staple remover or a pet snake?”

"A staple remover didn't make those marks, Grace. And neither did a snake. I think you know that, or you wouldn't have been up here pounding on Jaxon's door at six in the morning."

His acknowledgment of the elephant in the room—or should I say the monster—has a kind of calmness washing over me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. Maybe it's the medicine, maybe I'm going into shock, or maybe I'm just relieved to have someone finally being real with me.

Whatever it is, I take a deep breath and hold on to it with both hands as my very first conversation with Jaxon plays through my head. *There are more things in heaven and hell, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.* And then I ask him—because I have to hear it out loud: "So what *did* make these marks?"

For long seconds, he doesn't answer. And then, just when I've given up on him speaking at all, he says, "The truth is, Grace, sometimes the most obvious answer really is the right one."



There's Never a Hallucinogen Around When You Need One

Mekhi and I don't have a lot to say after that charming revelation—except for him insisting on escorting me back to my room. I mean, there really isn't much to say, considering I can't decide if I should trust him or not. I don't know this guy. I mean, yeah, Jaxon trusts him, but Jaxon is currently MIA, so that's not exactly a ringing endorsement.

The fact that Jaxon's been blowing up my phone with text messages for the last fifteen minutes doesn't matter much to me, either. I texted him earlier, and the only response I got was him sending Mekhi. So now he can ask Mekhi what he wants to know about me, because I am *not* answering.

Childish? Maybe. Prudent? Absolutely. Because in the mood I'm in, I'm afraid I'm going to say something I'll regret. Better to calm down and talk to him in person when he gets back. And also, if he tries to lie to me right now, I'll burn whatever is growing between us straight to the freaking ground.

Mekhi tries to start conversations several times on the way back to my room, but I'm too shell-shocked to participate much. It's not that I'm ignoring him; it's just that my head is spinning. This has to be a nightmare. It's the only reasonable explanation.

Eventually, Mekhi gives up on the small talk. It should be a relief, but that just leaves silence to stretch between us.

Still, it might just be the most awkward silence of my life, so I expect him to cut and run the second he delivers me to my door. Instead, he waits until I get the door unlocked.

“I’m not inviting you in,” I tell him without so much as bothering to turn my head to look at him.

“I don’t expect you to.” But the moment I get the door open, he slaps his palm flat against it to keep me from closing it. He doesn’t step inside, though, just stands as close to the threshold as he can get without actually crossing over it. Which seems strange, considering the beads are probably shocking the hell out of him—at least until I remember one of the first rules of vampire lore.

That they can’t come inside unless they’re invited in.

Which only makes his behavior more upsetting and me more freaked out—even before it becomes obvious that he’s going to prevent me from closing my door until he decides it’s okay.

“Hey! What are you doing?” I grab his arm and start trying to tug him back through the door.

He just shrugs me off. “Don’t worry. I’m not getting any closer.” Then he grins at my cousin. “Hey, Macy.”

“Hi, Mekhi.” She’s still bleary-eyed and in her pajamas, which probably accounts for why she doesn’t notice the power struggle going on between us. The cup of coffee in her hand attests to the fact that we didn’t wake her up, but I’m still glad she wasn’t in her underwear or something. “What’s up?”

“Nothing. He was just leaving.” I shoot him a warning look.

He doesn’t even pretend to look shamefaced when he says, “Jaxon doesn’t want her going to class today.”

“Okay.” She doesn’t even pause.

“Okay?” I demand. “Jaxon doesn’t get to tell me—”

“My dad already told her teachers she wouldn’t be there after

what happened yesterday. Great minds and all that.” She scowls at me. “You’re supposed to be in bed.”

“You going to stay with her?” Mekhi asks before I can defend myself.

“Yeah, absolutely. Why? What’s going on?”

“I don’t know yet. But I’m pretty sure that’s what Jaxon aims to find out.”

Macy’s face tightens. “Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know yet.” Mekhi nods toward me. “I’ll let her tell you about it.”

“You know I’m standing right here in front of you, yeah? Which means you can talk *to* me instead of *over* me.”

Mekhi’s brows hit his forehead. “Oh, really? Because I’m pretty sure I already tried that.”

“You know what? Bite me.” I make an oops face. “Oh right, I forgot. Someone already did.”

Macy whips her head around like it’s on springs. “What did you say?”

“She knows, Mace.”

If possible, my cousin turns even paler. “What exactly does she know, Mekhi?”

“You can go now,” I tell him, grabbing on to the edge of the door and using it to back him off the threshold.

“Look, Grace, I’m really sorry,” he says right before I get the door closed.

I pause. “Did you bite me?”

“What? No! Of course not.”

“Then you’ve got nothing to apologize for.” I sigh as some of the rage drains away. “I’m not mad at you personally, Mekhi. I’m just mad...and scared.”

“I get that.” He looks hesitant. “Does this mean you’re not mad at Jaxon, either?”

“Oh, no. I’ve got *all* the anger stored up for Jaxon, so don’t you dare go telling him otherwise.”

“Believe me, I won’t.” Mekhi grins. “The last thing I’m interested in doing is getting in the middle of *that* argument. Besides, it might be time someone takes my boy down a peg or two.”

“More like twelve,” I answer with a snort. “Now go away. I have stuff to do.”

With that, I close the door right in his face. And now that it’s just Macy and me, everything suddenly gets a whole shit ton more real.

I take a second to gather my wits, to try to formulate what I want to say. But Macy jumps in before I can do much more than have an OMG moment.

“Grace, it’s not—”

I turn to face her. “I’m going to ask you one question, Macy. Just one. And I want you to be totally honest with me. Because if you’re not...if you’re not, I’m going to pack up all my shit and go back to California. I’ll stay with Heather; I’ll file for emancipation; I’ll do whatever I have to do. But I swear, you will never see or hear from me again. Got it?”

If it’s possible, she grows even paler. Plus, if her eyes got any bigger, they’d take over her entire face. But that doesn’t stop her from nodding and saying quietly, “Okay.”

“Are you a vampire?” I can’t even believe I’m asking the question.

“What?” She shakes her head vehemently. “No.”

The answer has me sagging with relief...at least until I realize one question isn’t going to cut it. I have *dozens*.

“Is your father a vampire?”

“No.”

“Was *my* father a vampire?”

“Absolutely not.” She reaches a hand out to me. “Oh, Grace, is that what you’re afraid of?”

I blow out a long breath as the biggest, tightest knot in my stomach unwinds. “At this moment, I don’t know what I’m afraid of, Macy. But since you’re not acting like I’m losing my mind for asking these questions—and I have a perfect bite mark on my neck at this very moment—I assume that means vampires are real.”

“They are, yes.”

“And they go to this school.”

She nods. “Yes.”

“And Jaxon is a vampire.” I hold my breath as I wait for her answer.

“I really think you should talk to him about that, Grace. I mean—”

“Macy.” I drop the anger, let her see the fear and frustration that are riding me hard. “Please.”

She just looks at me, her face miserable.

“I thought we were friends, not just family.”

“We are. Of course we are.”

“Then tell me the truth. Is. Jaxon. Vega. A. Vampire?”

Macy sighs. “Yes.”

I was expecting it—I was—and still it explodes over me like a grenade. My knees go out from under me, and I hit the floor hard.

“Grace!” Macy’s next to me in the space between one second and the next. “Are you okay?”

“I have no idea.” I close my eyes, lean my head back against the door, which is conveniently close to where I dropped. “That’s why he can be outside without a jacket.”

“Yes.”

“So that means Lia...”

“Yes.”

I nod. “Flint?”

“No, no. Flint’s definitely not a vamp.”

I close my eyes as relief sweeps through me, at least until she continues. “He’s a...”

“What?” I open one eye. “He’s a what?”

“I’m not sure you’re ready.”

“Will I ever be ready? Finish the sentence, please. He’s a...”

“Dragon.”

Now I open both eyes. “Say that again?”

She sighs. “He’s a dragon, Grace. Flint is a dragon.”

“Of course he is. You mean he’s got—” I hold my arms up and kind of flap them up and down.

“Yes, he’s got wings.”

“And...fire?” I answer my own question. “Of course he does. With a name like Flint, how could he not?”

My brain is imploding. I can feel it actually turning to mush and folding in on itself under the weight of all this new information. I mean, who needs LSD when you go to Monster High?

Even worse, something tells me we aren’t done yet. Which is probably what leads me to snark, “And that makes you what? A fairy?”

“I’m not a fairy.” She sounds insulted.

“Not a fairy, not a vampire, not a...dragon?”

Macy sighs. “I’m a witch, Grace.”

I run her words back through my head another time or five, but still. They make the least amount of sense of anything I’ve heard this afternoon. “I’m sorry?”

“You heard me.” Now she’s smirking at me. “And you want to know something else?”

“At this point, no. I don’t. Not even a little bit. I’m done. My brain is—”

“You should have been one, too.”

Be Careful What You Witch For

Her words go off like a bomb inside me. They can't be right—*she* can't be right. I mean, the whole idea is absurd.

“I’m sorry, but you just blew it.” Not for the first time in the last ten minutes, I stare at my cousin like she’s a few pieces of straw short of a broomstick. Or, perhaps more appropriately, as if she’s taken to riding a broom around our dorm room in a pointy black hat.

“Whatever prank this is, whatever weird-ass mass hallucination you have going on here, you took it one step too far with that claim. Because I may be a lot of things, but I am not, nor have I ever been, a witch.”

I wave my hand in a magic-wand kind of gesture. “See, nothing happens. No glass dissolving and sending you tumbling into a snake pit. No ruby-red slippers to click together and take me home. No poisoned apple or magic mirror. So no, definitely not a witch.”

Macy laughs. She actually laughs. “I’m not saying you *are* a witch. I’m just saying that if your dad hadn’t fallen in love with your mom and lost his magic, you probably would be.”

“Wait a minute. You’re saying my dad *was* a witch?”

“A warlock, yeah. Just like my dad. And I’m a witch. It’s a family thing.”

I’m pretty sure my mind has stretched as far as it can go before just full-on caving in on itself. “I don’t understand. How could my dad be a witch and I not know it?”

“Because he lost his powers when he fell for your mom. Witches aren’t supposed to marry ordinary humans—weakens the bloodlines. So usually, when a witch falls in love with one, they...lose their powers.”

“So my dad was a warlock, but then he wasn’t. And that’s why I’m not a witch?” Looks like I was wrong. My mind can still boggle.

“Pretty much. Yeah.”

“Are you screwing with me, Macy?” I ask, because I have to. “I mean, you have to be messing with me, right?”

“I’m not messing with you, Grace.”

“Are you sure? Like...really sure?”

She leans over and hugs me. “I’m really, really sure.”

“Yeah, I was afraid of that.” I just sit there for a minute, trying to absorb what she’s telling me. “And my dad was okay with that? Losing all his powers?”

“From what my dad says, he really loved your mom. So yeah, he was.”

“He did love her. They loved each other a ridiculous amount.” I can’t help but smile a little as I remember. “They were totally the parents who couldn’t keep their hands off each other. I used to tell them how gross they were. But honestly, it was kind of nice, you know? To see that two people could love each other that much after so many years.”

“I bet.” Macy sighs wistfully.

“So,” I say, trying to act like I’m okay with everything I’ve just learned. “I’m related to witches, huh?”

“Yeah. Bizarre, right?”

“A little bit.” I eye her speculatively. “So...can you fly around the room or something?”

“To prove I’m not messing with you?” she asks with an arch of her brow.

“Maybe.” Definitely.

“No, I *cannot* fly around the room.”

“Why not?” I ask, strangely disappointed.

“You know this is real life and not a book, right? Things like that don’t actually happen.”

“Well, what kind of witch are you if you can’t do something an eleven-year-old kid can do?”

“The kind that doesn’t come from J. K. Rowling’s brilliant imagination.” She waves a hand toward the electric teakettle that always sits on top of the fridge. It starts steaming and whistling instantly.

I try to tell myself that she had it turned on the whole time, but a quick glance reveals that it’s not even plugged in. Because of course it isn’t. Why would it be?

She doesn’t stop with the teakettle, though. She waves her hand again, murmurs something under her breath, and I watch in fascination as she makes a cup of tea without ever leaving her spot on the floor.

“That’s a real cup of tea?” I ask her as it comes floating across the room toward us.

“Of course it is.” She snatches the cup out of midair, then holds it to me. “Want a sip?”

At this point, I’m pretty sure I’d rather drink rat poison. “I think I’ll pass, thanks.”

She shrugs, then lifts the tea to her own lips and blows a few times before taking a small sip.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this when I got here? Why

didn't your dad?"

For the first time, she looks shamefaced. "I think he was planning to, but you kept getting hurt, and it never seemed like a good time."

"I'm not sure there's ever a good time to tell someone that monsters are real." I shake my head, try to remember how to breathe. "I can't believe this is happening. I just...can't believe it."

"Sure you can," she says with a sly smile. "Otherwise you wouldn't be so freaked out."

"I'm not freaked out. I mean, yeah, I'm on the floor and I can't feel my legs, but other than that, I think I'm handling the whole thing fairly well."

"Of course you are." She grins. "Except for the fact that every word that's come out of your mouth for the last ten minutes has squeaked."

"That's—" I pause and clear my throat because maybe, just maybe, I'm a little high-pitched. "What do you expect? You and Mekhi are trying to convince me that I'm living in the middle of a less bloody version of *Game of Thrones*. And winter is already here."

Macy laughs, then raises a brow. "You don't actually believe high school is a *less* bloody version of *Game of Thrones*, do you? I mean, how many times have you almost died since you got here?"

"Yeah, but those were accidents. I mean...they were accidents, right?"

"Probably." She inclines her head. "Yeah, they were. But Jaxon's freaking out, and he never freaks out, so..."

"He's freaking out because someone *bit* me! Someone who isn't him, I mean." I pull off the bandage for a second time and turn my head so she can see the puncture marks just below my cut.

"Oh! Is that what this is all about?" She sounds way too

relieved, considering I just told her some vampire sunk his or her teeth into me without my permission.

Then again, do they ever ask permission before they bite? And if so, who would be foolish enough to say yes? One more question to add to the tally of about a hundred or so I have waiting for Jaxon.

“I can explain everything,” Macy adds flippantly.

“Oh, well, okay then.” I make an expansive go-ahead gesture, then continue. “Please feel free. Explain away.”

“Marise did that to you.”

“The school nurse?” I don’t know why that shocks me so much, but it really, really does. “Marise is a vampire, too?”

“She is. And she didn’t have a choice. She had to bite you if she had any hope of repairing your arterial tear.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “I thought it was a nick?”

“It was a tear. And you almost died. You would have died, in fact, if Jaxon hadn’t been there and done what he did to save you.”

“You mean running me to the nurse’s office?” The squeak is back.

“I mean sealing your wound so you wouldn’t bleed out while he got you to the nurse’s office.” She puts her cup of tea aside and reaches for my hands. Then, as she’s squeezing tight, she continues. “Vampire venom has a lot of different properties, depending on what the vampire intends. Jaxon didn’t bite you, but he did use his venom to seal your wound. And from what I understand, he was a little too thorough, and Marise couldn’t get through it to actually suture the wound.”

“So she bit me and got through that way?” I try not to shudder at the thought of her teeth sinking into my neck. When I believed it was Jaxon, it *freaked* me out but didn’t gross me out. I can’t say the same about having anyone else’s teeth in me, though.

“She bit you and injected her own venom, using the

anticoagulant properties instead of the coagulant ones. It was enough to break down what Jaxon had done and let her heal you properly.”

“So vampires can just do that? Just...override each other’s venom?”

“Keep in mind, I’m not a vampire, but—”

“Right. You’re just a witch.”

She ignores my interruption. “I don’t think they can. At least, not normally. But she’s an older, more mature vampire and she’s also a healer, which gives her extra abilities in times like that. It’s why she’s the school nurse. But from what my dad said, it still took a lot of skill and venom to undo what Jaxon had done. That boy was determined to save you.”

Not going to lie, hearing that feels good. But I’m still mad at him, even though right now, I’m not sure why. Except... “So what you’re saying is that I have two vampires’ venom running through my blood right now?”

Macy settles back with a laugh and an eye roll. “Trust you to focus on that.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s pretty hard not to focus on it when every vampire movie I’ve ever seen is playing in the back of my head. I mean, I’m not going to...” I mime getting fangs.

She cracks up. Like full-on, rolling on the floor, laughing her ass off.

“That’s not a no!” I whine.

She sits up, wiping tears from her eyes even as she continues to giggle. “No, Grace, you’re not about to sprout fangs and start sucking people’s blood. You’re fine. In fact, the only reason you’re alive is because a vampire was with you. And not just any vampire, but Jaxon. Most of the others would have had a really hard time stopping themselves from...”

“Drinking me dry?” I finish the thought she very obviously

didn't want to.

She rolls her eyes. "Yeah, that's not how I would have put it."

"Doesn't make it any less true, though, does it?"

Macy doesn't answer, just grabs her teacup and stands.

I follow her, unwilling to just let her walk away right now when I still have so many questions. About vampires. And witches. And dragons, for God's sake. How can *dragons* exist and the rest of the world not know about it?

Speaking of which... "There aren't any other creatures here that you forgot to mention, right? No zombies, no unicorns, no—"

"Werewolves."

"Exactly. No werewolves."

"I wasn't saying no, Grace. I was answering your question."

"Oh." I swallow. "So...vampires, dragons, witches, and werewolves."

"Well, if you're going to get technical, they're wolf shifters really, more than werewolves."

By all means, let's get technical at this late date. "And the difference is?"

"Werewolves need the full moon. Wolf shifters can shift anytime. Same with the dragons."

"So Flint can be a dragon anytime he wants?"

"Flint *is* a dragon, all the time. He can shift between his dragon and human form whenever he wants."

"I have so many questions." And most of them start and end with *how is this possible?*

"I know." She leans over and gives me another hug.

"Marc and Quinn?" I think about the guys who tried to throw me out in the snow the first night. "Wolf shifters?"

"Yeah. Who apparently do get a little extra wild around the full moon." She shakes her head, obviously still annoyed. "The jerks."

“No argument here. They really were douches.” I pause as something occurs to me, then say, “But they listened to Jaxon, even though he’s a vampire.”

Macy snorts. “I’m sorry, but haven’t you noticed? *Everyone* listens to Jaxon.”

“Yeah.” Like in my Brit Lit class yesterday, when no one would come in. “Why is that exactly?”

“It’s a really long, really messed-up story, which I’m happy to tell you. But I’m seriously starving. Can I answer the rest of it over breakfast in the dining hall?”

“Yeah, of course. But I thought you told Mekhi we weren’t going to leave the room until Jaxon gets here.”

“I told him we weren’t going to class. And if the bite on your neck is what’s got their panties all wadded up, then it’s no problem. We know where the bite came from, and we know that it’s harmless. So we’ll just go grab a quick breakfast and be back in the room before Jaxon even gets here.”

She’s right. I know she’s right. Plus, it’s not like I’m going to ask how high every time Jaxon expects me to jump. Everyone else at this school might listen to him, but I’m not some supernatural creature. I’m human, and now’s as good a time as any for Jaxon to figure out I don’t play by the same weird, convoluted, *terrifying* rules everyone else around this place does.

“Sounds good,” I tell her. “Turns out, I’m suddenly really hungry, too.”

“I bet. Massive blood loss will do that to a girl,” Macy says as she disappears into the bathroom, a pair of school sweats and PE T-shirt in her hands.

She comes out two minutes later, and not only is she dressed, but her hair is slicked back in an adorable style, and her face looks like she spent half an hour putting on makeup in front of the mirror.

“What happened to you?” I demand.

“Oh, just a little glamour.” She wiggles her fingers in front of her face. “And can I say how glad I am that you know now? My life is going to get so much easier.”

“Apparently.” Suddenly self-conscious, I grab my purse off my desk and pull out the peach lip gloss I always keep in the inside pocket. I swipe it over my lips as we head out the door. “So how exactly do you do that glamour thing?”

“Oh, it’s just a little trick all witches know.”

“Yeah, well, flying’s still cooler,” I tease.

“Maybe.” She closes the door behind me. “But there’s a lot I can do that you don’t know about yet.”

“Like what?” I ask, totally fascinated.

“Pretty sure that’s for me to know and you to find out...”

Vampires, Dragons, and Werewolves, Oh My!

The halls are crowded as we make our way to the dining hall—it's thirty-five minutes before first period starts, and apparently everyone in the school tries to eat during the same half an hour period. Which makes sense. I mean, if I'm not worrying about bizarre fang marks or trying to fit in at a new school, I don't want to get up one second sooner than I have to, either.

Still, now that I know, everything feels even weirder than normal. People move by us, jostling Macy, bumping into me, or even skirting us entirely the same as they did yesterday. But today, all I can do is look at them and wonder. Vampire? Shifter? Witch? *Dragon?* It's so strange, like falling into the pages of a fantasy novel...or a horror movie, depending on how this all goes.

As we walk, I kind of assign monsters to people based on characteristics they exhibit, but I have no idea if I'm right or not. For example, the really athletic ones who bound down the hall with all the energy, I figure must be wolves. But Jaxon moves hella fast when he wants to, so I could be completely wrong.

I want to ask Macy, just to see if any of my guesses are right. But it seems rude to whisper about people's ...species? Identity?

Whatever I'm Supposed to Call It? in the middle of the hall where anyone can hear. Or, for that matter, to whisper about it at all.

But at the same time, don't I kind of need to know? Like, if I cut my finger in front of a dragon, I figure it won't matter at all. But what happens if I do it in front of a vampire? Do I need to run, or is everything going to be okay?

And why are vampires even in the dining hall if they drink blood? I mean, I saw Jaxon eat that strawberry at the welcome party, but he didn't touch any of the food at breakfast yesterday. And now that I think about it, neither did any of the other guys.

And if Jaxon does drink blood regularly, where does he get it? Where do any of the vampires get it? I mean, short of kidnapping a fully stocked bloodmobile every day—which seems an impossible feat anywhere, let alone in the middle of freaking Alaska—where do they get the blood?

More importantly, do I really want to know the answer to that question?

Also, I've seen Jaxon and Lia outside during the day. I mean, it wasn't super sunny, but it was definitely not pitch-black, either. So does that mean the whole *vampires can't be in the sun* thing is a myth? If so, there are a lot of stories throughout history that got it wrong.

It's so confusing. Like, supremely confusing, especially since there's a part of me that still thinks Macy and Mekhi are just messing with me. I mean, yeah, I saw what she did with that teacup, but still... Witches? Dragons? Vampires?

Can I just say that I'm *really* beginning to miss my alien theory?

Especially when we step in the cafeteria and—surprise, surprise—everyone is looking at me. Per usual. I thought it was because I was the new girl. Now I can't help but think it's because I'm the *human* girl. Which then leads to thoughts about whether

or not any of them are thinking about eating me.

Do wolf shifters eat humans? Or is it just vampires? What about dragons? What do they eat?

I really hope human isn't on their delicacy list. Then again, wishing hasn't gotten me much in the last month. I can't expect it to get me this, either.

"You know what?" I tell Macy as we make our way to the buffet table at the front of the dining hall. "Maybe I should go back to the room."

"What's wrong?" She searches my face with a concerned frown. "Are you feeling dizzy? Or weak?"

"I'm feeling...out of place."

"Oh." Understanding dawns. "They're the same people you went to class with yesterday. The same people you had a snowball fight with the day before that."

"The same people who have been watching me since I got here. I thought they'd be over it by now, that they'd get used to me. But they're *never* going to get used to having a human here."

"I hate to be the one to break it to you, Grace, but the stares you're getting these days have way more to do with Jaxon than they do with you."

I don't bother to hide my confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, he's a big deal here. Obviously. And he's shown an interest in you. Which makes *you* a big deal. It also makes you the person eighty percent of the female population wants to murder."

"Because they're jealous, right? Not because—"

"Yes, Grace." She rolls her eyes. "Because they're jealous. They want to be where you are."

"Bandaged up and sore, with a weak ankle and a vampire bite in my neck?" I joke.

"Exactly," she deadpans back. "Now, can we please get in line? It's chocolate croissant day, and they go fast."

“Of course.” I gesture for her to precede me. “Who am I to get between a girl and her chocolate croissant?”

“A question every guy in the place asks himself at least once on Wednesdays,” a familiar voice says from right behind me.

“Hi, Flint.” I turn to him with a little bit of a forced smile. Not because his being a dragon makes me like him less, but because his being a dragon *FREAKS ME OUT*.

“Hey, New Girl.” He looks me over. “Gotta say, I’m not a huge fan of your new look.”

I touch the bandages self-consciously. “Yeah, me neither.”

“I bet.” He reaches out, rubs a reassuring hand up and down my non-damaged arm. “You don’t look so good. Why don’t you go sit down and let me bring you a plate?”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know I don’t *have* to. But I still feel guilty about the whole *falling out of the tree* thing. This will help me make up for it.” He gives me a beseeching look.

“What do you have to feel guilty about? You saved me from getting hurt worse.” For the first time, I wonder if the reason he didn’t get hurt at all is because he’s a dragon. If so, then I’m glad he isn’t human, glad that he wasn’t in jeopardy because of me.

I look up at him with his incredibly handsome face, his glowing amber eyes, his charming grin, and wonder if I’m seeing the dragon or the human. Or maybe I’m seeing both. Who knows?

And then he raises his brows at me, and I wonder why it even matters when Flint—whatever and whoever he is—is my friend.

“Thank you again for that, by the way. I really appreciate it.”

“Stop it, Grace. You wouldn’t even have been up that tree if it weren’t for me.”

“I think we’re just going to have to agree to disagree on this,” I tell him.

“Fine. We’ll agree to disagree...as soon as you let me bring you breakfast.” He gives me his most charming grin, the one that would probably knock my socks off if I hadn’t seen Jaxon first.

But I did see Jaxon, and now he’s pretty much all I *can* see, vampire or not.

I start to argue with Flint some more—I’m sick of people treating me like an invalid—but we’re holding up the line. And since the last thing I want to do is make an even bigger spectacle of myself, I just give in.

“Fine. I’ll take a chocolate croissant if you can get one.”

“Oh, I’ll get one,” he assures me.

“I have no doubt. And some fruit, if there is any.”

“Sure. And what do you want to drink?”

I grin. “Surprise me.”

His eyes darken, and for a second, something flashes in them. But before I can figure it out, it’s gone, and the lightness is back. And so is the teasing as he says, “Believe me, I intend to.”

Then he grabs both my shoulders and turns me around. “I’m sitting over there.” He points toward the end of the center table. “There’re a few extra seats. Why don’t you head that way, and I’ll be over as soon as I get our plates?”

“Sounds good.” I do as he says, stopping just long enough to let Macy know where we’ll be sitting.

Flint watches me the whole time, but I figure that’s because he doesn’t trust me to actually sit down. What he doesn’t realize is that when the alternative is standing around awkwardly waiting for him while everyone looks on, it takes all my self-control not to run to a seat. Preferably in the back corner of the room.

Especially when I see Mekhi and Luca heading my way, dark frowns on their usually relaxed faces. I think about waiting for them, but I don’t really want to hear what they have to say. And I don’t want to explain to them why Macy and I decided it would

be okay to come to the dining hall—at least not in front of most of the student body.

So instead of waiting for them to catch up, I do what any girl who doesn't want to deal with a boy would do—I take off toward another boy's territory. In this case, the table where Flint and his friends are sitting.

It may not be the bravest or brightest move, but it's definitely the path of least resistance. I'm not ashamed to admit that I could do with a little less resistance and a little more easy in my life. Especially today.

I'm pretty sure it would have worked, too—the Order and Flint dislike each other *that* much—except for the terrible wrenching sound that splits the air directly above me just as I get close to Flint's part of the table.

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Good Thing Pancakes Aren't on Today's Menu

It's a horrific noise, and I glance up, trying to figure out what could possibly be making it, just in time to see the biggest crystal chandelier in the place pull free of the plate holding it to the ceiling. I have about half a second to think, *Oh shit*, and then someone is there, slamming their body into mine.

The hit knocks the breath out of me—or maybe it's the subsequent slam, face-first, into the nearest wall that does it. Either way, it's a struggle to get my breath back, especially since there's a long, lean male body pressed against my back, his arms caging me in on either side.

I realize that at the same time there's a gigantic crash. For a second, all I can hear is the tinkle of glass as it shatters and flies, hitting everything in its path. The boy behind me grunts and wraps himself more tightly around me, and that's when I know. I may not be able to draw a full breath yet, but there's enough oxygen in my body for my brain to function again. And my newly functioning brain registers one thing above all else—that the guy currently wrapped around me is *Jaxon*.

"Are you okay?" he demands as soon as the glass stops flying. I don't answer him—I can't. My lungs still aren't working at

full capacity yet and neither is my voice.

I try to nod, but that's obviously not good enough for him because he's whirling me around, his hands skimming over my body as he orders, "Answer me, Grace! Are you all right?"

"I'm okay," I finally manage to gasp out. But that's when I get my first good look at him and realize that while I may be okay, he very definitely isn't. "You're bleeding."

"I'm fine." He shrugs it off. "Does anything hurt?"

"I'm not the one who's injured." I run a light finger over the right side of his face, pausing at the bloody parts. "What are you even doing here? I thought it would take a couple more hours for you to get back."

His dark eyes smolder at me—and not in a good way. "Obviously."

I don't know what to say to that, and he doesn't look like he's in the mood to listen anyway, so I reach into my purse (score one for vanity) and pull out the tiny first aid kit I keep inside it. It's a habit I picked up after my parents died in the car accident—ridiculous, since it would have taken more than a first aid kit to save them, with their injuries. Still, Heather's mom suggested it when I was freaking out right after they died, and for whatever reason, it calmed me down. Today's the first day it's actually going to come in handy, though.

"Sit down," I tell him, and when he doesn't move, I put my hands on his chest and gently push.

He doesn't budge.

"Please," I ask, moving a hand up to cup his uninjured but scarred cheek. "You're hurt. Let me take care of you."

For long seconds, he still doesn't move, just stares at me, unblinking. It sends chills down my spine—I don't think I've ever seen Jaxon this furious. Which...fine. He can be as angry as he wants as long as he lets me treat his wounds. "Please," I say

again, and this time I accompany it with a little shove to his chest.

He still doesn't say anything but slowly, grudgingly, he allows me to guide him to the nearest chair.

Macy makes it to me right around the time I get Jaxon settled. Tears are pouring down her face as she throws her arms around my neck. "Oh my God, Grace! Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," I tell her even as I try to disengage from her hug. What is wrong with her and Jaxon? Can't they tell that he's the one who's hurt? Maybe it's not a big deal when vampires bleed; I don't know. But it's a big deal to me.

I pull an antibacterial wipe out of the pack and press it gently to his cheek. He doesn't wince. In fact, he doesn't move at all—just stares stonily ahead. Still, I clean the wound carefully, making sure there's no glass in it, before squeezing ointment onto his cheek and following it with a Band-Aid. I have a moment of wondering if he needs the ointment—can vampires even get infections? But he doesn't stop me, and neither does Macy, so I figure even if it's not necessary, at least it won't hurt anything.

By now, adults are swarming the dining hall, teachers checking for injuries and trying to clear students out of the room as quickly as possible. It's a surprisingly quiet affair, one I don't pay much attention to as I move on to the jagged cut on Jaxon's arm.

I'm pretty sure it looks worse than it is, considering he hasn't bled much and it's already clotting. I wonder if maybe their venom isn't the only thing with a quick coagulant in it. Still, I clean it as thoroughly as I did his cheek. I have to admit I'm a little surprised no teacher has come by and tried to bundle him off to the nurse, but maybe there are people with worse injuries and I just don't realize it.

It's not until I finish bandaging his arm and step back that I realize there's a very good reason no one has tried to take Jaxon

for medical attention. It's the same reason that the room is so quiet despite everything that's happened.

The five other members of the Order have surrounded us.

They're several yards away, but they have definitely formed a perimeter around Jaxon and me, one that no one but Macy has been able to get through. Not that many people are exactly trying. Flint's getting into it with Byron, who isn't budging, but other than that, everyone else is standing back. Watching and obviously waiting, though I'm not sure for what.

It's an eerie feeling to know that they're expecting something that I don't understand, and it has my stomach dropping and nerves skittering along my spine. I assume it's because I've done something wrong, but what was I supposed to do? Just leave him bleeding?

"I'm...sorry." I say it haltingly as I'm packing up my first aid kit. "I guess I shouldn't have done that."

"Don't apologize," Jaxon growls as he stands up. "And don't duck your head like that. No one in here has the right to say a damn thing to you."

"I just wanted to help. And to thank you for saving me."

"I wouldn't have had to save you if you'd been in your room, where you were supposed to be. Where I told you to be." He grinds the last sentence out between clenched teeth.

I take offense at the *where I told you to be* part of his statement, but considering he's still shaking a little bit, I decide not to make an issue of it. Yet. Instead, I explain, "Macy and I were hungry. Plus, once we figured out the mystery of the bite, we figured it would be fine for us to come down to breakfast. It turns out the nurse—"

"Chandeliers don't fall on their own," he tells me. "And neither do tree branches."

"The tree branch didn't just fall. The wind was out of control."

“There are at least two hundred people in this room alone capable of making that kind of wind. And almost that many capable of dropping that chandelier.” He’s speaking softly now, so softly that I have to strain to hear him, even though he’s right in front of me. “I keep trying to tell you, but you won’t listen. Someone is trying to kill you, Grace.”

What Doesn't Kill You Still Scares the Hell Out of You

At first, his words don't register. And when they finally do, it takes a few more beats for me to remember how to form my own words.

"Kill *me*?" I finally whisper back to him as my stomach plummets and a chill works its way down my spine. Or I should say, I *try* to whisper because it's pretty hard to keep my voice super low now that the squeak is back.

I would be embarrassed, but to be honest, I feel like I've got a lot to squeak about. It's been one hell of a morning, and the hits just keep on coming. "That's ridiculous," I tell him even as I wipe my suddenly damp palms against my skirt. "Why?"

"I don't know yet."

I take a deep breath, try to get my racing heart back under control as I struggle to think through the panic slamming through me. It takes a minute, but I finally get the anxiety to recede enough that I can answer, "It doesn't make sense. I'm harmless."

Especially at this school. I mean, I'm not a threat at a regular high school. I'm sure as hell not a threat at a school where a quarter of the residents can shoot fire and fly.

"There are a lot of words I'd use to describe you, Grace.

‘Harmless’ isn’t one of them.” He glances around the room, eyes narrowed, whether in thought or warning, I can’t be sure. “And if *I* know that, so do they.”

“Jaxon.” I wrap my arms around my waist and rock back on my heels a little as I try to convince him to see reason. As I try to convince *myself* that his words don’t mean anything. “You can’t really believe that. You’re just upset at the near miss. You’re not thinking clearly.”

“I always think clearly.” He starts to say more, but then something over my shoulder draws his attention. His eyes narrow to slits that have my heart racing all over again.

I turn and follow his gaze, only to find him staring at the rope that ties to the chandelier so it can be lowered for cleaning. Or should I say what’s left of the rope, because even from here, I can see that it’s in two pieces.

“It broke,” I tell him, but there’s an uncertainty to my voice when I say the words. Because how often does one of those ropes actually break? “Sometimes ropes—”

Jaxon interrupts me with, “Your uncle’s here,” and a small shake of his head.

“So? I want to talk about this.”

“Later.”

Before I can voice another objection, Uncle Finn closes in. “Grace, honey, I’m so sorry it took me this long to get to you. I was out on the school grounds.” He pulls me into a hug and holds me tight.

Normally, I’d find it comforting—the way he feels and smells so much like my dad. But right now, all I can think about is the look in Jaxon’s eyes when he said someone was trying to kill me. His face was completely blank, completely unreadable. But burning deep in his eyes, where most people don’t get close enough to look, was the most terrifying rage I’ve ever seen.

I don't want to leave him alone with it, don't want to let him stay trapped in his own head. But no matter how I pat Uncle Finn's back and assure him I'm okay, my uncle doesn't seem to be letting go any time soon.

"I can't begin to tell you how horrified I am that this has happened to you," he says when he finally pulls back. His blue eyes, so like Macy's and my father's, are sad and shadowed. "Once is unacceptable. Twice in two days..."

I guess I should count myself lucky he doesn't know about me falling out of that tree a few days ago. Three near-death experiences in a week are a lot for anyone.

Then again, when I think of it like that, suddenly Jaxon doesn't seem so paranoid. And maybe I don't seem paranoid enough.

"Well, let's get you out of here," my uncle says. "We hadn't planned on you going to class today anyway, but I would like to talk to you before you go back to your room."

"Oh, sure." I can't imagine what there is to talk about—I mean, what is there to say except *whew, close call*—but if it will make him feel better, I'm all for it.

Except every instinct I have is screaming at me not to leave Jaxon, screaming that this isn't the time to walk away from him, though I don't know why. "But can I come by your office a little later? I have a couple of things I need to do first—"

"Jaxon's already gone, Grace." I whirl around to find that my uncle is right. Jaxon *is* gone. "And I want to talk to you before you see him again anyway."

I don't know what that means, but I don't like the sound of it. Any more than I like the fact that, once again, Jaxon took off without so much as a goodbye.

How does he do it? I wonder as I reluctantly follow my uncle. How does he just disappear without my even hearing or

sensing him moving? Is it a vampire thing? Or a Jaxon thing? I'm pretty sure it's a Jaxon thing, but as I walk toward the dining hall doors, I realize every other member of the Order is gone, too. They all left, and I didn't have a freaking clue.

Which only backs up what I was telling Jaxon before my uncle showed up. I'm just a harmless human—why on earth would anyone here think I'm dangerous enough to try to kill me?

I mean, Jaxon, sure. I'm surprised they aren't lined up around the castle to take a shot at him—everything about the guy screams total, complete, *absolute* power. I'm pretty sure the only thing keeping him safe is that those same things also scream dangerous as fuck. I can't imagine anyone here being foolish enough to challenge him—even Flint backed down right after the snowball fight.

Which is why dropping a chandelier on Jaxon makes sense. But dropping one on me? Come on. One bad spell, wolf attack, or even *earthquake*, and I'm a goner. Why go through the trouble of bringing an entire chandelier down on top of my head when a broken window nearly did me in all on its own?

Uncle Finn doesn't say anything as we walk to his office and neither do I. I have to admit I am surprised, though, when he turns down what has to be the least-ornate corridor in this entire place and then stops in front of the most boring-looking door. Doesn't exactly jive with my idea of any headmaster's office, let alone the headmaster of a school that's taken on the responsibility of educating students from a wide range of paranormal backgrounds.

That impression is only reinforced when he opens his door and ushers me inside the most boring room in existence. Gray carpet, gray walls, gray chairs. The only spot of brightness in the room—if you can even call it that—is the heavy cherrywood desk loaded down with piles of papers, files, and an open laptop.

Basically, it looks like every other principal's office I've ever seen—except the window coverings are sturdier and the gray carpet is a little more plush.

He catches me staring and grins. "Surprised?"

"A little bit. I thought it would be more..."

"More?" His brows go up.

"Just more. No offense, Uncle Finn, but this has to be the most utilitarian room I've ever seen. I guess I expected a witch to have more flair."

"Good thing I'm not a witch, then, huh?"

"What?" My mind boggles. "I thought— Macy said— I don't—"

"Relax, Grace," my uncle says with a laugh. "I was just trying to lighten the mood. Macy told me she spilled all the tea."

"No offense, but it's kind of hard to keep the tea in the pot when I have fang marks in my neck."

"Touché." He inclines his head, gestures to one of the plain gray chairs in front of the desk as he walks around to the back of it. "Have a seat."

"I am sorry you had to find out that way," he continues when we're both seated. "It's not what I wanted for you."

He looks so miserable, I want to tell him it's okay, except it really isn't. "Why didn't you tell me? Or my dad? Why didn't he ever admit that he was a—" I break off, still having a hard time wrapping my head around the fact that my dad was a real-life witch. Or at least he'd been born one.

"I believe the word you're looking for is warlock," my uncle tells me, filling in the word I'm having such a hard time saying—and believing—with a sympathetic smile. "And yes, your father was a warlock—and very powerful at one point."

"Before he gave it up for my mother."

"It's a little more complicated than that." My uncle makes a

face, kind of wobbles his head back and forth. “No warlock gives up his power willingly, but some, like your father, are willing to risk everything for the greater good.”

That’s not how Macy described it, which makes me wonder just what my cousin doesn’t know about my father. And what my uncle does. “What—what do you mean?” I ask as my heart skips a beat. “What did he do?”

For a second, my uncle looks far away, but his eyes clear at my question. “It’s a long story,” he tells me. “One for another day, considering you’ve got more than enough going on for this morning.”

“Pretty sure I have enough going on for a lot of mornings,” I answer. “For *all* the mornings, really.”

“Yeah, you do.” He sighs. “That’s actually what I want to talk to you about. You’ve had quite a first week, young lady.”

Talk about an understatement. I wait for him to say more, wait for the other shoe to drop even though it feels like a hundred have already fallen, but time passes and he doesn’t say anything. Instead, he just kind of steeplest his hands in front of his chin and stares at me across the desk. I don’t know if he’s doing it because he’s waiting for me to break or if he’s just trying to figure out the right way to say whatever he wants to say. I figure it must be the latter, because I haven’t done anything wrong. I have no secrets to spill, especially not compared to the man who runs a school for monsters.

The prolonged silence does give me time to think, though. About all the wrong things. Including the fact that in the last week, what little control I’ve had over my life has disappeared completely.

I mean, seriously. Death by chandelier has to be one of the most random and bizarre deaths on the planet. The whole thing seems ridiculous, no matter what Jaxon says. But losing my

parents the way I did—having them go from happy and alive to cold and dead in the space from one minute to the next—has taught me just how easy it is for life to be extinguished.

As simple as the blink of your eye, the snap of your fingers, making the wrong turn at the wrong time...

I squeeze my eyes shut as the images flood back, desperate to stem them before they fill my head. Before they overwhelm me and bury me in the grief I'm only just learning how to crawl out of.

The pain must show on my face, because suddenly my uncle is breaking the silence to ask, “Are you sure you’re okay, Grace? That chandelier was huge—and terrifying.”

It *was* huge and terrifying, and I’m not sure how my life has gone so completely out of control. Five weeks ago, Heather and I were shopping for homecoming dresses and complaining about AP English. Now I’m an orphan living with half an encyclopedia of supernatural creatures and dodging death on the regular. At this rate, my only hope is that the universe doesn’t hold a *Final Destination*-type grudge.

“I’m fine,” I tell him, because physically I am. There’s not even a scratch on me—or at least, not a new one. “Just a little shaken up.”

“Give me a break, kid. *I’m* traumatized, and I wasn’t even there. I can’t believe you’re only a little shaken up.” He reaches for the hand I have resting on the desk and pats it a little awkwardly. I know he’s trying to be comforting, but his eyes are filled with worry as they search my face.

I do my best to make sure there’s nothing for him to find there, and I must succeed because, eventually, he shakes his head and leans back in his chair. “You’re just like your mother, you know that? She always faced whatever life handed her head-on, too. No tears, no hysterics, just cool, calm resolve.”

His casual mention of my mom now—when I’m missing her so much—destroys me, has me squeezing my hands into fists and digging my nails into my palms in an effort to keep it together.

It helps that Uncle Finn doesn’t stay there, dwelling on my mom’s incredible ability to take everything in stride—something I haven’t inherited, no matter what my uncle thinks. Instead, he pulls something up on the computer and prints it out.

“You really sure you’re okay? You don’t want Marise to check you out?” he asks for what feels like the millionth time.

No freaking way. I know Macy said she bit me so that she could mend my artery, but that doesn’t mean I’m anxious to let her near my throat again—or any other part of my anatomy, for that matter. “I swear I’m fine. It’s Jaxon you should be concerned about. He shielded me from the glass.”

“I’ve already requested that Marise check him out,” he tells me. “And I’ll call him in later to thank him for saving my favorite niece from harm.”

“Only niece,” I remind him, falling into the game we’ve played my entire life. It’s a tiny bit of normalcy in this day that is anything but normal, and I grab on to it with both hands.

“Only *and* favorite,” he tells me. “One doesn’t discount the other.”

“Okay, favorite uncle. I guess it doesn’t.”

“Exactly!” His slightly strained smile turns into a delighted grin. But it doesn’t last long as silence once again descends between us.

This time I can’t stop myself from fidgeting—not because I’m nervous but because I want to get out of here and get to Jaxon. He looked like he was on edge earlier, and I just want to make sure nothing bad happens—to him or anyone else.

But Uncle Finn obviously takes my fidgeting for something else entirely, because he rubs a hand over his hair with a heavy

sigh. Then says, “So now that the cat is out of the bag...”

“Don’t you mean the werewolf?” I ask with a raised brow.
“Or do you have cat shifters up here, too?”

He laughs. “Nope, just the wolves and dragons for now.”

“Just.” My tone is ripe with irony.

“You must have a lot of questions.”

A lot? Nah. Just two or three million. Starting with the question I asked earlier that he chose not to answer. “Why didn’t you tell me? You could have told me when you asked me to move to Alaska, when you came for the funerals.”

“I figured you were pretty overwhelmed then, and the last thing you needed was for me to try to convince you that vampires and witches are real.”

It’s a fair point. But still... “And after I got here?”

He blows out a long breath. “I figured I would ease you in slowly. That first night, I had planned to let you know that things were different here than you might expect, but you had the most miserable altitude sickness. Then everything else happened, and it just seemed easier to leave you in the dark for a while. Especially when Dr. Wainwright told me that after talking to Dr. Blake, she thought we should let you get used to Alaska, and the huge change in your life, before you had to face the fact that everything you’d ever heard about the supernatural world was actually real.”

“Everything?” It’s my turn to lift my brows.

“Maybe not *everything*. But a lot of it, certainly.”

What he says makes sense, I guess, but I’m still skeptical—especially since I haven’t even had a chance to meet Dr. Wainwright yet. But how could anyone actually think they could hide the fact that this school is filled with things that go bump in the night?

I mean, when I think of Flint jumping out of a tree to save

me or Macy doing a glamour right in front of me or the shifters walking around in nothing but a pair of jeans or Jaxon...doing whatever Jaxon does, it seems impossible to imagine I wouldn't catch on. Sure, I was thinking aliens instead of vampires, but I still knew something was very, very wrong.

My skepticism must show on my face, because my uncle kind of grimaces. "Yeah. In hindsight, it was a bad plan all around. It's not exactly easy to hide the fact that vampires and dragons are real when we're in the middle of a giant turf war."

"Turf war?" I ask, because Macy has already alluded to the same thing. I thought she was talking about high school clique BS, but now that I know we're talking about different supernatural species...her warning makes a lot more sense.

And seems a lot scarier.

He shakes his head. "That's for another day. I'm pretty sure you've had as much as you can handle today—I know I have. Which leads me to the reason I've really called you in here."

It's pretty much the most awkward change of subject ever, and I almost call him on it because I know there is more to the story than he's telling me. A lot more. I'm also sure there are a lot more stories that I don't have a clue about, let alone the information that fleshes them out. But I don't think arguing with him is the way to get him to talk.

So instead of demanding answers to all my many, many questions, I bite my tongue and wait to hear what Uncle Finn has to say.

"I was thinking, a lot of really horrible stuff has happened to you since you got here."

"Not much has actually happened to me," I remind him. "Jaxon has saved me a bunch of times."

"I know he has, but we can't count on Jaxon to always be around. Stuff happens here that doesn't happen in other

schools—as you've seen the last few days. What happened with the earthquake was a freak accident, and I'm sure the chandelier was as well. But it's made me think. What will happen to you if someone loses control of their powers when Jaxon or Flint or Macy isn't around to whisk you out of the way? What happens if you end up getting seriously hurt?" He shakes his head. "I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

"Do you think that's what happened? Someone lost control of their powers?"

"We're not sure, but that's the assumption we're going with right now. Some witch was trying to see what she could do and *bam...* While we've never actually lost a chandelier before, we have had crystals fly across the room. Among other things."

That might actually be the best news I've heard all day, because it means Jaxon was probably freaking out for nothing. No one is trying to kill me—someone just had an oops with their powers and I happened to be in the way. Which makes so much more sense than thinking that someone might actually be out to get me.

"Anyway." My uncle is back to steepling his fingers. "That's why I want to send you back to San Diego."

Sweet Home Alaska

“Send me back?” Horror slides through me like a plane on an icy runway—fast, desperate, all-consuming. “What do you mean? There’s nothing for me there.”

“I know.” He shakes his head sadly. “But I’m beginning to think there’s nothing for you here, either. And at least there, you’ll be safe.”

“You mean like my parents were safe?” The words are torn out of me, ragged and painful and terrified. Going back to San Diego means leaving Jaxon, and I don’t want to do that. I *can’t* do that, not now, when it’s obvious that something is happening between us. Not now, when he’s the first thing I think of when I wake up and the last before I fall asleep.

“That was a fluke, Grace. A terrible accident—”

“Accidents can happen anywhere. And if something is going to happen to me, I’d rather it happen here when I’m with Macy and you and—” I break off, unwilling to put voice to something I’m just beginning to understand myself. That somehow, in just about a week, Jaxon Vega has come to mean something to me.

But apparently, my uncle is more perceptive than I thought, because he finishes the sentence for me. “Jaxon?” he asks gently.

I don't answer. I *can't*. Whatever is between the two of us is between the two of us. No way can I try to explain it to Uncle Finn.

Then again, my lack of answer is pretty much an answer in and of itself. "I know Jaxon can be..." He pauses, blows out another long breath. "Seductive. I know how the girls feel about him, and I get it. He's—"

"Uncle Finn! No!" I all but put my hands over my ears to keep from hearing my uncle refer to the boy I'm falling for as "seductive."

"No?" he asks, looking confused. "You're not attracted to—?"

"I mean, no! Just no! I don't know what, if anything, is going on with Jaxon and me, but *we*"—I gesture back and forth between us—"are not talking about it."

"We aren't?"

"No. We aren't." I shake my head emphatically. "Not now, not ever."

"I swear, talking to you about boys is as bad as trying to talk to Macy about them," he says with a roll of his eyes. "Every time I ask her about Cam, she acts like I asked her to swallow eye of newt or something. But fine. No talking about boys. Except I do need to warn you that Jaxon is—"

"Dangerous. Yeah, Macy's already ground that into my head. And maybe he is, but he's never been anything but gentle with me, so—"

"I wasn't going to say dangerous." For the first time, there's a touch of annoyance in his voice. "And you'd know that if you stopped interrupting me."

"Oh, right." I can feel myself start to blush. "Sorry."

He just shakes his head. "What I was going to say is that Jaxon is not like any other boy you've ever met."

"Well, obviously." I do the same fang-miming thing I did with

Macy, and Uncle Finn bursts out laughing, too.

"I meant for a lot more reasons than just his being a vampire, but yes, there is the vampire thing as well."

Oh. His words set off butterflies in my stomach, though I'm not sure why. "What else is there?" I ask, because I can't *not* ask. "I know about his brother—"

"He told you about Hudson?" Now my uncle sounds shocked.

"Just that he died."

"Oh, yes." The way his face relaxes tells me there's a lot more to the story than what I know. Well, that and the fact that everyone has the same reaction when I mention that I know about Hudson. "His death left Jaxon with a lot of responsibility to shoulder—Hudson's and his own."

"I can imagine."

"No, Grace, you can't." He looks more somber than I have ever seen him. "Because being a vampire isn't like being a regular person."

"Okay. Sure. But he was regular once, right?" I think back on every vampire movie I've ever seen, every novel I've ever read. "I mean—"

"No. That's just it. Jaxon was born a vampire."

Now I'm the shocked one. "What do you mean? I thought all vampires..."

"Not all, no. Vampires can be made—in fact, most of them are. But they can also be born. Jaxon was born, as were the other members of the Order. And that means...a lot in our world."

I can't even begin to imagine what it means, because I'm still stuck on his *vampires can be born* revelation. "But how? I mean, I thought you had to be bitten to become a vampire?"

"Usually, yes. But that's assuming they want to turn you. If they don't, you just get a bite. Like..."

"Like what Marise did to me, you mean."

“Yes.” He nods.

“That still doesn’t explain how vampires can be born,” I tell him. Part of me feels like I’m going to drown with all this new information, and part of me is kind of like...huh, okay. No big deal.

I guess after making the leap to accept that all these creatures exist, *how* they came to exist isn’t nearly as shocking.

“Like other things, vampirism is a genetic mutation. Rare, exceptionally rare, but a genetic mutation nonetheless. The first documented cases happened a few thousand years ago, but since then, many more have happened.”

“Wait a minute. You have *documented* cases of vampires from thousands of years ago? How is that possible? I mean, how can you prove it?”

“Because they’re still alive, Grace.”

“Oh. Right.” Something else I didn’t see coming, though I probably should have. “Because vampires don’t die.”

“They do die, just much more slowly than the rest of us, because their cells develop differently than ours.”

Of course they do. Otherwise there wouldn’t be so much bloodsucking and who knows what else. “And Jaxon is one of these vampires? One of the old ones?” The thought turns the butterflies into vultures. Which is strange. I mean, I’m totally willing to accept the vampire thing, so why does the old thing totally freak me out?

“Jaxon was born into the most ancient vampire family. But no, he’s not four thousand years old, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Oh, thank God. “So these families are the only ones who can give birth to vampires? I mean, vampires can’t just be born from anyone, right?”

“It’s a genetic mutation, so yes, vampires can be born to anyone. Usually, they aren’t. Usually, born vampires come

from one of the six ancient families, but other born vampires do happen. They're usually the ones you read about in stories, because they don't have any knowledge of who or what they are, so they..."

"Run rampant killing everyone in sight?"

"I wouldn't put it quite like that," he tells me with an exasperated look. "But yes. They are the ones who tend to make other vampires, because they don't know any better. Or because they're lonely and want to create a family. Or for several other reasons, as well. The older families aren't like that, though."

"What does that mean? They don't kill people?" I have to admit that's a huge relief.

At least until my uncle laughs and says, "Let's not get carried away."

"Oh, well, then. Jaxon has..."

"I'm not in the habit of talking about students with other students, Grace. And this conversation has gone far afield from where I intended it to go."

True, but I've learned a lot, so I'm more than okay with where the conversation has gone. Though the laugh that accompanied his *let's not get carried away* line was more than a little chilling. "I don't want to go back to San Diego, Uncle Finn."

It's the first time I've said it out loud. The first time I've really even thought it and believed it. But as the words come out of my mouth, I know they're true. No matter how much I miss the beach and the warmth and the life I used to have with my parents, going back there isn't what I want. My parents are gone forever, and nothing else that San Diego has holds as much appeal as Jaxon.

Nothing.

"Grace, I'm glad you like it at Katmere Academy. I am. But I don't know if it's safe. I thought I could protect you here,

but obviously being a regular person in a school meant for paranormals is dangerous.”

Considering my week, that seems like an understatement. But still... “Isn’t it my decision to make?”

“It is. But you can’t make it over a boy.”

“I’m not making it because of Jaxon. Or at least, not just because of Jaxon.” This, too, is true. “I’m making it because of Macy. And you. And even Flint. I’m making it because I miss San Diego and my life there, but that life is over. My parents are dead, and if I stay there, if I go back to the same school and the same life I had—minus them—it’s going to be a slap in the face. A reminder, every day, of what I lost.

“And I don’t think I can do that, Uncle Finn. I don’t think I can heal there, driving by my old house on the way to school every day. Going to all the places my parents and I used to go—” My voice breaks, and I look away, embarrassed by the tears in my eyes. Embarrassed by how weak I feel every time I think about my mom and dad.

“Okay.” This time, when he reaches across the desk, he takes both my hands in his. “Okay, Grace. If that’s how you feel, you know you can stay. You’re always welcome wherever Macy and I are. But we have to do something about all these near misses, because I am not okay with something happening to you on my watch. The day you were born, I promised your father I’d take care of you if anything ever happened to him, and I am not about to let him down.”

“That sounds perfect, because, honestly, I’m not a big fan of all the near misses, either.”

He laughs. “I bet. So what—?”

He’s interrupted by the buzzing of the intercom on his desk. *“Headmaster Foster, your nine o’clock call is on line three.”*

“Oh, right. Thanks, Gladys.” He looks at me. “Unfortunately,

I've got to take this. Why don't you head back to your room and relax for the rest of the day? I'll think about how we're going to keep you safe and come by around lunchtime to talk to you and Macy about it. Sound good?"

"Sounds great." I scoop my backpack off the ground and head for the door. Once I've got it open, though, I turn back to my uncle. "Thank you."

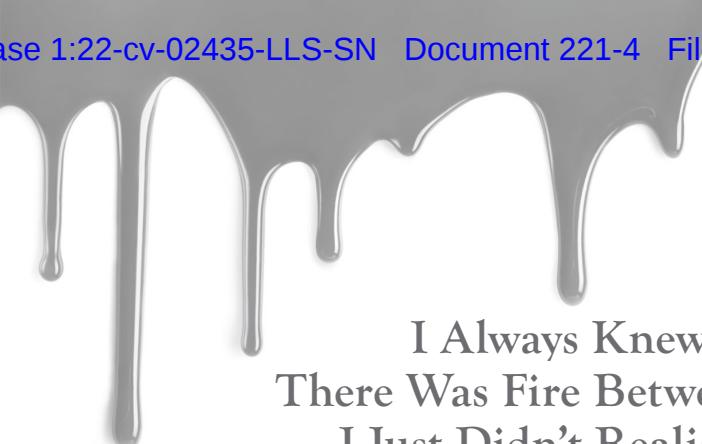
"Don't thank me yet. I haven't come up with any ideas."

"No, I mean, thank you for coming to San Diego to get me. Thank you for taking me in. Thank you for—"

"Being your family?" He shakes his head. "You never have to thank me for that, Grace. I love you. Macy loves you. And you'll have a place with us for as long as you want it. Okay?"

I swallow the sudden lump in my throat. "Okay." Then I book it out the door before I turn into a blubbering mess for the second time in as many days.

But I've barely closed the door and made it three steps down the hall before the floor beneath my feet starts to shake. Again.



I Always Knew There Was Fire Between Us; I Just Didn't Realize it Was Your Breath

This one isn't bad—the ground just rumbles a little. But it's enough to make me nervous. More than enough to have me sheltering in the nearest doorway, like they taught us in elementary school. No way am I interested in any more injuries... or any more close calls, for that matter.

When the aftershock finishes a few seconds later, I pull out my phone and text Jaxon. Just to let him know I'm okay—and to make sure he is. Plus, I'd like to actually have a conversation with him where neither one of us is hurt—and half the school isn't looking on. I text him a quick, *Where are you? Want to meet up?* then wait impatiently for his answer.

It doesn't come, which only makes me more nervous.

I wish I'd gotten Mekhi's phone number this morning so I could text him, too, but I didn't, so I'm stuck, wandering the halls and waiting for Jaxon to text me back.

Not sure what else to do, I head up the stairs toward Jaxon's tower. But truth is, I'm not keen on showing up at his door uninvited again. He's the one who left me in the cafeteria, and he's the one who isn't answering my texts. I want to see him, want to talk to him, but I'm not going to chase him anymore.

This time, he needs to come to me.

Which means I probably shouldn't head back to my room, where I'll spend all my time obsessing over where Jaxon is and what he's doing instead of something productive. And I've already spent enough of my time thinking about that boy today—probably too much, considering the way he's currently ignoring me.

It's that thought more than any other that has me heading down the hallway to the library as soon as I get to the second floor. I've been meaning to go back during regular hours so I can take my time looking around—and also maybe even find some books to check out. Apparently, I have a lot to learn about paranormal creatures, and now is as good a time as any to get started. Plus, I figure my uncle and Macy can't complain I'm not resting if I spend the day curled up with a bunch of horror movie throw pillows and a good book.

Class is in session, so the library is almost empty when I get there. Which is more than okay with me—the fewer people I run into, the lower the chance of any more “accidents.”

I think about starting in the mythology section, seeing if there are any books on the different paranormal creatures I go to school with. It's where I would start in a regular library, but here at Katmere, monsters are real. So would I find books about them under nonfiction? Or biology?

This whole *monsters are real* thing is going to take a lot of getting used to.

I decide to stop at the main desk and ask the librarian where I should start. And the truth is, I've been dying to meet her since I found this place the other day. Her sticker choices and gargoyle placements alone mark her as supercool in my book.

It's an impression that is only reinforced when I actually get to see her up close.

She's tall and beautiful, with glowing copper skin. Her long, dark hair is threaded with orange and silver tinsel—leftover from Halloween, I imagine—and she's dressed like a total hippie, all flowing, long-sleeve boho dress and boots. Plus, she's got a giant smile on her face as I approach, something I haven't seen much of here at the very dark and very Gothic Katmere Academy.

"Ms. Royce?" I ask when I reach the front of the desk.

"You can call me Amka. Many of the students do." If possible, her grin gets even friendlier. "You must be Grace, the new student all the fuss is about."

My cheeks go warm. "That's not quite how I would have put it, but yeah. I guess I am."

"It's good to meet you. I'm glad to get to know the girl shaking up the status quo around here. They could use it."

"They?"

She chuckles and leans forward just a little. Then, in a loud, staged whisper, says, "The monsters."

My eyes go wide at the description, and relief floods me as I think back on what my uncle said. "So you're human, too?"

"Most of us are human, Grace. We just also happen to have a little something extra, that's all."

"Oh, right." I feel like a jerk. "Sorry, I didn't mean to offend you."

"You didn't." She holds out a hand. Seconds later, a light wind blows through the library, ruffling my hair and making the magazines on the rack behind me flutter.

"Oh! You're a witch!" I turn my face up so I can feel the breeze.

"I am. From the Inupiat tribe," she answers. "With an affinity for the elements."

"The elements?" I repeat, emphasizing the S. "So not just wind?"

"Not just wind," she agrees. She closes her hand, and the wind dies down instantly. Seconds later, without so much as a flick of her fingers, the candles in all the wall sconces begin to burn. "Fire. And I'd show you water, but I'm thinking you've had enough snow already."

"I really have," I agree. "But...if you don't mind, I'd still like to see it."

She nods, and seconds later, snowflakes start falling from the ceiling directly above our heads.

Instinctively, I reach my tongue out and taste one. Then tell her, "That's the coolest thing I've ever seen."

"Keep your eyes open," she answers. "There are a lot of cool things to see at Katmere."

"I'm looking forward to it," I say honestly. Because watching her manipulate the elements actually calms me down, convinces me that maybe things aren't as scary as I fear.

"Good," she says with a wink. "Now, what brings you to my library today?"

"Honestly, I just wanted to explore some more. I was in here the other day, and I fell in love with it. You've done an amazing job."

"Books are fascinating and fun. I figure the rooms that house them should be as well."

"You've definitely made that happen." I turn and look behind me. "I mean, the stickers alone are incredible. I could spend all day reading them. And the gargoyles. And the horror movie pillows? I love it all."

"I figure what's the good of working in a place like this if I can't have a little fun with it."

"Exactly!" I say with a laugh. "Which is actually the second reason I'm here. I was hoping to find some books that would help me learn more about the different kinds of people who go

to school here.”

She smiles at my clumsy attempt to incorporate the first lesson she taught me in my request—that most of the people here are human, just different. “I admire your open mind. And your willingness to embrace what you’ve learned.”

“I’m trying. I figure there’s a lot to learn.”

“You’ve got time.” She reaches over and takes hold of my hands, clasping them between both of hers.

It surprises me, but doesn’t offend me, so I don’t pull away. Though I kind of wish I had when her eyes start to do this weird swirling thing.

It’s no big deal, I tell myself. I mean, Macy did a glamour and I was totally okay with it. This is no different.

Except it feels different. It feels like she’s looking deep inside of me, like she can see way more than I want her—or anyone—to.

Which is ridiculous. I mean, just because she’s a witch doesn’t make her a mind reader. Except just when I’ve got myself convinced that nothing weird is happening, she whispers, “Don’t be afraid.”

“I’m not,” I answer, because what else am I supposed to say? That her eye thing is freaking me out a little bit?

“You’re more than you think you are,” she continues.

“I...don’t know what that means.”

She smiles as her eyes go back to normal. “You will when you need to. That’s what matters.”

“Thank you,” I say, because what else do you say at times like these? I guess I should work up a few comebacks, since I’m going to be here for a while.

“Here.” Amka rips a piece of paper off a notepad on her desk and scribbles something down on it, then folds it in half and hands it to me. “You might benefit from checking out the end of the stacks a couple of rows down.”

“What section is it?” Excitement thrums through me, chasing away the disquiet of just a few moments ago.

“Dragons.” She flashes a dimple. “Always a good place to start.”

“Absolutely.” I think of Flint and all the questions I have about him. “Thanks!”

“No problem. When you find what you’re looking for, you’ll know what to do with this.” She hands me the piece of paper, then reaches under her desk and pulls out a bottle of water. Here, take this, too. And drink it. You need to stay hydrated at this altitude.”

“Oh, yeah.” I take the bottle. “Thanks again.”

She just waves me on my way.

I head down the aisle she pointed to, wondering what kind of books on dragons I’ll find there—especially considering it looks like I’m in the mystery section. But as soon as I get to the end of the aisle, Amka’s grin makes sense, as do her directions. Because sitting at one of the round tables—with his earbuds in and a really old book open to a section with weird writing—is Flint.

Dragons indeed.

He glances up when I take a step toward him, and a look I can’t quite decipher flits across his face for a second. It’s followed quickly by a huge grin as he pops out one of his Airpods. “Hey, New Girl! What are you doing here?”

It’s impossible for me not to smile back. “Researching dragons, apparently.”

“Oh yeah?” He pats the chair next to him. “Looks like you came to the right place.”

“Looks like I did.” As I move to sit next to him, I hand him the note Amka gave me. “I think this is for you.”

“Really?” His brow wrinkles a little as he reaches for the paper. While he reads it, I check my phone to make sure I haven’t

missed a text from Jaxon.

I haven't.

"So," Flint says, deliberately not making eye contact as he drops the note on the table next to the book he's reading. What do you need to know about dragons?"

"We can do this later," I tell him. "I don't want to interrupt whatever you're working on."

"Don't worry about it. This is nothing." He closes the book before I can see much of anything and slides it away from him.

I see the language on the cover, though. "Oh, hey! Is that an Akkadian text?"

His eyes go wide. "How did you know about Akkadian?"

"Actually, I just learned about it for the first time a couple of days ago. Lia was researching it for a project. Are you guys in the same class?"

"Oh, yeah." He seems distinctly unenthusiastic, which isn't exactly a surprise considering how much they seem to dislike each other.

"What class is it for?" I reach for the book. "I kind of want to take it next semester, if I can."

"Ancient Languages of Magic." He eases the book away before I can even open it up and slides it into his backpack. "So, what are you looking to find out about dragons?"

"Anything. Everything." I hold my hands up in an *I'm clueless* gesture. "This whole *magical creatures are real* thing is...a lot."

"Nah. You'll get used to it in no time."

"That makes one of us who thinks so."

He laughs. "Come on. Hit me with your first question."

"Oh, I haven't really thought of specific questions. Except... Macy says you have wings. That means you can actually fly?" My mind boggles at the thought.

"Yeah, I can fly." He grins. "I can do other stuff, too."

“Like what?” I lean toward him, fascinated.

“Well, jeez, if we’re going to get into all this, I feel like we need some sustenance.” He reaches for his backpack.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“It’s all good, New Girl.” From the backpack’s front pocket he pulls out a half-eaten bag of marshmallows, then holds it out to me. “Want one? They’re my favorite snack.”

“Mine too,” I tell him as I take one. “I mean, usually in Rice Krispies treats, but I’m not complaining.”

I start to pop it in my mouth, but he stops me with a hand on my arm. “Hey, that’s no way to eat a marshmallow.”

“What do you mean?”

He just wiggles his brows. Then tosses the marshmallow up in the air and *blows fire straight at it out of his mouth*.

I shriek, then cover my mouth, half in shock, half in delight, as the marshmallow turns a perfect golden brown right in midair. Seconds later, Flint closes his mouth, and the treat falls directly into his hand.

He holds it out to me. “Now that’s how you eat a marshmallow.”

“You’re telling me!” I take it from him and pop it in my mouth. “Oh my God, it’s hot!” I say around the gooey goodness.

He gives me a look that says, *No shit, Sherlock*.

“And it’s perfectly roasted!” I can’t believe how cool this is.

“Course it is. I’ve been doing this a long time.” He holds the bag out to me. “Want another one?”

“Are you kidding? I want them all. All the marshmallows, all the time.”

He grins. “My kind of woman.”

“Can I throw it?” I pick out another one.

“I’d be insulted if you didn’t.”

I giggle as I toss the marshmallow up in the air. And this time

I scream only a little as Flint shoots a stream of fire straight at it.

When it's done, he closes his mouth and the marshmallow falls straight back into my hand. It's hot—really hot—so I juggle it between my hands for a second, waiting for it to cool down. Then I hold it out to him. "This one's yours."

He looks surprised as he glances between the marshmallow and me. Then he says, "Hey, thanks," and pops it in his mouth.

We roast the rest of the bag, one after the other—sometimes two or three at a time—and Flint cracks jokes during the whole thing. When the marshmallows finally run out, my stomach is killing me—partly because I've been laughing so hard and partly because I just ate a shit ton of marshmallows. Either way, it's a good hurt, unlike so many other things at this place, so I'll take it.

I'm also thirsty from all the sugar, and I reach for the water bottle Amka gave me. As I do, I can't help wondering if she gave it to me because she knew I was going to need it. Is foresight a thing with witches? Just one more thing I need to research.

I start to open the bottle, but Flint snatches it out of my hand before I can even break the seal. "Drinking warm water is such a plebian thing to do," he teases. Right before he opens his mouth and blows a stream of freezing cold air straight at the water.

Seconds later, he hands me an ice-cold bottle with another waggle of his brows.

"Wow. Just...wow." I shake my head in excitement. "Is there anything else you can do?"

"What? Flying, fire, and ice aren't enough?"

"Yes! I mean, of course they are." I feel like a total jerk. "I'm sorry. I was just—"

"Chill, I'm just messing with you." He holds out a hand, much like Amka did when she was calling up the wind. Except Flint isn't about anything as boring as wind.

I watch in astonishment as a cluster of pale-blue flowers

blooms on his hand. “Oh my God,” I whisper as I start to smell their subtle fragrance. “Oh my God. How did you do that?”

He shrugs. “I’m one of the lucky ones.” He holds it out to me, and I reach forward, stroke a gentle finger over one of the flower’s delicate petals. It feels like silk.

“These are called forget-me-nots. They’re Alaska’s state flower.”

“They’re beautiful.” I shake my head.

“You’re beautiful,” he answers. And then he leans forward and weaves the stem of flowers into my curls, right above my left ear.

My stomach bottoms out as his lips come within an inch of mine. *Oh, God. Oh no!*

Instinct has me jerking back in my chair, eyes wide and breath coming way too fast.

But Flint just laughs. “Don’t worry, New Girl. I wasn’t hitting on you.”

Oh, thank God. I nearly sag in relief. “I didn’t think—I was—I just—”

“Oh, Grace.” Flint half laughs, half shakes his head. “You’re something else. You know that?”

“Me? You’re the one who can shoot fire and ice and create flowers out of thin air.”

“Good point.” He inclines his head, watching me with those molten amber eyes of his. “But I’ll make you a promise right now, okay?”

“Okay?”

“When I hit on you, it’ll be because you want me to. And we’ll both know exactly what’s going on when I do.”

I'll Get You and Your Little Dog, Too

I have no idea what to say to Flint's promise, which is probably a good thing, considering my throat is suddenly desert dry and I can't speak anyway.

Not because I want Flint to hit on me—I don't. And not because I'm offended by his words, because I'm not. But because when I look into his laughing amber eyes, when I see his infectious smile, I can imagine that if Jaxon wasn't around, I would totally welcome any move this dragon chose to make.

But Jaxon *is* around, and sitting here with Flint just got a million times more awkward.

I take a long sip of water to wet my throat...and to stall as I try to figure out what to say to defuse the situation. But before I can come up with anything, Flint's phone buzzes with a series of texts messages.

He picks up the phone, glances at the messages. And his entire demeanor changes. "Something's going down."

Immediately, I think of Jaxon. "What is it? What's happening?"

Flint doesn't answer, just scoops up his backpack and starts shoving things inside it. As he does, the note Amka sent him

falls open and I can't help but read it:

"There are a thousand ways to get somewhere, but not all ways are the correct one."

I don't have time to wonder about what it means because Flint scoops it up and then barks, "Come on, let's go."

I grab my purse and follow him, dread pooling in my stomach as I try to figure out what could possibly make him react like this. "What's going on?" I ask again.

"I don't know yet. But the Order is on the move."

"On the move? What does that mean?" I'm all but running in an effort to keep up with Flint's long-legged strides.

"It means there's going to be trouble." He bites the words out like they taste bad.

Not that I blame him. God knows, I've had more than enough of that in the last few days to last me a lifetime. "What kind of trouble?" I'm right behind him when he pushes the library doors open and starts booking it down the hall.

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

I fumble my phone out of my pocket, determined to get an answer out of Jaxon. But by the time we get to the main passing area near the stairs, I don't have to. Because one level up is the Order, walking in grim, single-file silence.

They're moving fast, and though their backs are toward us, I can tell Flint is right. There's a problem—a big one. It's in their squared-off shoulders and the tenseness that runs through each and every one of them like a live wire.

I call to Jaxon, but he's either ignoring me or he doesn't hear me. Either way, it's another bad sign, considering he usually knows exactly what's happening around him at all times.

Just the thought that he's in some kind of trouble has me rushing on the stairs right after Flint, determined to catch up with them before something terrible happens.

But Jaxon is moving swiftly, too, and we end up chasing him down one hall, past the physics lab and several classrooms. He pauses for a second at the door of a room I haven't been in yet—I think it's one of the student lounges—and I call his name again. I'm all the way at the other end of the long hall, so I'm not surprised he doesn't hear me.

Byron does, though. He turns his head and stares straight at me. I'm too far away to see his eyes clearly, but the look on his face is more than a little frightening as his eyes dart back and forth between Flint and me. Then he shakes his head at me in a quick back-and-forth motion.

It's obvious he wants me to leave them alone, but that's not going to happen—at least not before I know what's going on in there. So I just lay on the speed, determined to get to Jaxon before he does...whatever it is he intends to do.

I don't make it, and neither does Flint. Jaxon walks in the room, followed by the other five members of the Order—including Byron, who doesn't look my way again.

Panic slams through me, and I run faster than I ever have before, ignoring the way my neck and arm hurt. Ignoring the way it makes me feel dizzy. Ignoring everything but the need I have to get to Jaxon, to make sure he doesn't do anything because of me that he can't take back.

I don't know how I know this is about me, but I do.

I hit the door just as Jaxon sends all the furniture in the room flying in every direction.

Next to me, Flint curses. But he doesn't move to interfere, even when Jaxon sends a guy that I'm pretty sure is Cole flying next, slamming him against a turned-over table and an upended chair in the process.

My breath catches in my throat in a strangled scream. I knew he was powerful, knew he was dangerous—everyone has

been telling me so since I got here—but before now, I had no idea what that meant. But as Jaxon slams the guy—and yeah, it's definitely Cole—into the wall with a flick of his fingers, then has him dangling a dozen feet in the air using nothing but his mind, I begin to understand.

Still, no warning, no vampire lore, nothing anyone could have told me could prepare me for what comes next.

Several students rush him—other shifters, I assume since Quinn and Marc are among them—but just like in the cafeteria, Mekhi, Byron, and the others make a perimeter around him. The shifters don't seem to care, though, because they keep running straight at them in an effort to rescue the one Jaxon is still dangling about ten feet in the air. And that's when all hell breaks loose, the five members of the Order in an all-out brawl with three or four times as many shifters.

It's fast and brutal and terrifying to witness, some shifters fighting as humans, others as wolves. Teeth and claws come out, raking down Luca's back and Liam's arm as the vampires grab on to fur and send the wolves slamming to the ground. Jaxon must be the only one with telekinesis, though, because the Order is fighting the old-fashioned way—with fists and feet and what I'm pretty sure are fangs.

I turn to Flint, hoping he'll wade in, but he's just watching the fight with clenched fists and narrowed eyes.

Other students don't have his reticence, though, and they join the melee—more shifters and vampires squaring off against one another in a fight that will end I don't know how. But the ground is already littered with fur and blood. If someone doesn't stop this soon, people are going to *die*.

Jaxon must have the same thought because he suddenly drops Cole. He hits the ground hard, falling on his ass before scrambling back to his feet. At the same time, Jaxon waves his

other arm out in a wild arc that stops everyone in their tracks. Some even fall over completely.

I'm still across the room at the entrance, but the power he blasts out hits me, too. And Flint. We both end up stumbling backward, grabbing on to the double-wide doorframe to keep from falling.

I know I'm just a human, but Flint isn't, and he was shoved backward, too. I can't imagine the force the people close to him felt. No wonder so many of them ended up on the ground.

I think it's over—the fight and whatever Jaxon planned on doing to that shifter—so once the power blast dissipates, I take a step forward. “Jaxon!” I call, hoping to get his attention. Hoping to make him think in the middle of all this madness.

He glances my way for one second, two, and his eyes are like nothing I've ever seen before. Not blank. Not ice. But fire. A raging inferno blazing in his gaze.

“Jaxon,” I say again, softer this time, and for a moment, I think I'm getting through.

At least until he turns his head, cutting me off. Blocking me out.

Seconds later, he reaches out a hand, and Cole is once again brought to his feet. This time, though, the entire room holds its collective breath as we wait to see what comes next.

It doesn't take long for us to find out.

Cole starts struggling, eyes going wide and fingers clawing at his throat as Jaxon reels him in. Slowly dragging him closer and closer until Cole is once again standing directly in front of him. Eyes bugging out. Livid red scratches on his neck. Terror in his eyes.

It's enough, more than enough. Whatever Jaxon is doing, whatever point he is trying to make, he's done it. Everyone in this room knows what he can do.

“Jaxon, please.” I say it softly, not sure if he’ll be able to hear me but unable to keep silent when he’s so close to killing this boy. So close to destroying the shifter and himself in one moment of careless rage.

Everything inside me tells me to go to him, to get in the middle of him and the shifter before Jaxon does something he can’t take back. But when I try to move toward him, it’s like I’m running straight into a wall.

Unable to rush forward.

Unable even to take one single step.

It’s not me—I can move or walk however I want—but there’s an invisible barrier in front of me, as strong as stone and twice as impenetrable.

No wonder Flint has made no move to interrupt this nightmare. He must have known the wall was there all along.

It’s Jaxon’s doing—of course it is—and I’m furious that he’s done this, that he’s cut me off from him and his fight so completely. “It’s enough, Jaxon!” I yell, pounding on the wall because I can’t do anything else. “Stop. You have to stop.”

He ignores me and terror swamps me. He can’t do this. He can’t—

Suddenly, I lurch forward as my hand and arm slide right through the mental barricade that Jaxon erected.

“What the fuck?” Flint breathes from beside me, but I’m too busy trying to get Jaxon’s attention to respond. Or pull back.

“Jaxon!” I all but scream his name this time. “Stop. Please.”

I don’t know what’s different—if it’s because I somehow pierced through the barrier or if he’s reached the same conclusion I have. Either way, whatever psychic grip he’s been using on Cole disappears. Now standing under his own power, the shifter nearly falls to his knees even as he drags loud, painful-sounding breaths through his abused throat and into his air-starved lungs.

Relief sweeps through me—and the room. It's finally over. Everyone is still alive. Some are more than a little worse for wear, but at least they're a—

Jaxon strikes so fast, I almost miss it, fangs flashing and hands grabbing onto Cole's shoulders as he leans forward and sinks his teeth into the left side of his throat.

Someone screams, and for a second I think it's me, until I realize my throat is too tight to make a sound. Seconds pass—I don't know how many—as Jaxon drinks and drinks and drinks. Eventually the shifter stops fighting, goes limp.

That's when Jaxon finally lets him go, lifting his head and dropping Cole into a limp heap on the ground.

The guy's pallor is frightening, but he's still alive, eyes wide and frightened, blood trickling from the fang marks on his neck, when Jaxon looks out over the room and hisses, "This is the only warning you get."

Then he turns and walks straight toward me, without so much as a backward glance.

And when he takes my elbow in a grip that is as gentle as it is unyielding, I go with him. Because, honestly, what else am I going to do?

The First Bite Is the Deepest

Jaxon doesn't say a word as he escorts me down the hall—and neither do I. After what I just saw, I'm too... I don't know what. I want to say "shocked," but that's not the right word. Neither is "disgusted" or "horrified" or any of the other descriptions—any of the other emotions—that someone who's an outsider might expect to feel.

I mean, watching Jaxon nearly drain that guy wasn't what I would call pleasant, but he *is* a vampire. Biting people's necks and drinking their blood is pretty much par for the course, isn't it? It feels hypocritical to freak out now just because I got to see it up close and personal—especially when Jaxon obviously had a reason for what he did. Otherwise, why go on a rampage like that? And why announce to the whole school that this is the only warning they're going to get?

I'm more concerned about finding out why he felt the need to issue the warning than I am about what he did. Especially since I'm terrified that it has something to do with me and his fear that someone is trying to hurt me.

I don't want to be responsible for Jaxon getting into trouble—and I definitely don't want to be responsible for Jaxon hurting

someone...or worse.

Not for the first time, my hand goes to the marks at my throat as I wonder what would have happened if Marise hadn't stopped. If she had bitten me for a purpose other than to help heal me. Would I be as laissez-faire about Jaxon's treatment of that shifter if I had nearly died the same way?

I don't know. I just know that right now, I care more about Jaxon's state of mind than I do some boy I don't know. Some boy who, if Jaxon is right, wants me dead.

As for the rest? The telekinesis, the absolute control Jaxon exerted over everyone in that lounge, including me? The obscene amount of power he wielded with just a wave of his hand? I don't know how I feel about all that, either. Except, like the violence, it doesn't scare me the way it probably should.

He doesn't scare me the way he probably should.

My injured ankle twinges a little as we round a corner—more than likely all the running I did on it earlier—but I bite down the cry of pain that wells in my throat. Jaxon's moving fast, I assume because he's trying to get us somewhere we can talk before the consequences of what just happened catch up to him.

I mean, yeah, this is a supernatural school and the rules are probably different than what I'm used to, but I have a hard time believing it's okay for one of the paranormal species to start chowing down on another one in the middle of the student lounge.

No matter how much he might deserve it.

Which is why I don't complain about the pace Jaxon sets as we quickly make our way down several hallways to the back stairs. It's as we start climbing that I realize where he's taking me. Not to my room, as I half expected, but to his. And judging from the look on his face—the blank eyes, the tight jaw, the lips pressed into a firm, straight line—he expects me to object.

I have no intention of arguing with him, though. Not until

I know what we're supposed to be arguing about. And on the plus side, I'm pretty sure no one will be crossing Jaxon again any time soon, which means maybe I can make it through a whole forty-eight hours without any near-death experiences. Not going to lie, that counts for something, too, even though I feel a little Machiavellian just thinking it.

The second we make it to the top of the tower steps, Jaxon lets go of my elbow and puts as much distance between the two of us as can be had in his little reading alcove. Which leaves me...adrift.

Nothing has changed since I was here a few hours ago. The window is still boarded up, the rug still missing, the book I tried to read while I was waiting for him still sitting in the exact same spot.

And yet it feels like everything has changed.

Maybe because it has. I don't know, and I *won't* know until Jaxon opens his mouth and actually talks to me instead of standing there next to the fireplace, with his hands in his pockets and his eyes everywhere but on mine.

I want to start the conversation, want to tell him...I don't know what. But everything inside me warns that that's the wrong approach to take. That if I have any hope of navigating what's going on here, I need to know what Jaxon is thinking before I open my mouth and say something that ruins everything.

And so I wait, hands in the pockets of my hoodie and eyes nowhere but on him, until he finally, finally turns to look at me.

"I won't hurt you," he says, his voice low and rusty and so empty that it hurts to listen to it.

"I know."

"You *know*?" He looks at me like I've grown another head... or three.

"I've never thought you were going to hurt me, Jaxon. I

wouldn't be here if I did."

He looks shocked at my words. No, not shocked. Stunned, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water as he struggles for a decent response. When it eventually comes, it's distinctly underwhelming.

"Is there something wrong with you?" he demands. "Or is it just that you have a death wish?"

It's my turn to pull his favorite trick and lift a brow. "Dramatic much?"

"You're impossible." He nearly strangles on the words.

"Pretty sure I'm not the impossible one in this..." I break off because I have no idea what to call this thing between Jaxon and me. Relationship? Friendship? Disaster? I finally settle on "thing," which is probably the worst description possible of whatever it is we have. "After all, you're the one who keeps running away." I'm trying to lighten up the funereal atmosphere, trying to make him smile a little. Or if not actually smile, then at least not frown so hard.

It isn't working. In fact, I think he's looking even grimmer than he was a couple of minutes ago.

"You saw what I did, right?"

I nod. "I did."

"And you're telling me that it doesn't scare you?" He looks incredulous. Suspicious. And, in a bizarre turn of the tables, maybe even a little disgusted. "That it doesn't horrify you?"

"Which part?" I want to reach out, want to touch him so badly, but it's fairly obvious now isn't the time. Not when everything about him screams boundaries. Or, more accurately, armed battlements.

"Which...part? What does that even mean?"

"It means, which part of what I just saw should I be afraid of? The part where you threw everyone across the room? Or

the part where you hung someone in the air and choked him with your mind?” I ignore the frisson of discomfort that works its way down my spine at the memory. “Or am I just supposed to be hung up on the biting part?”

“I didn’t realize this was an either-or situation,” he growls at me as he paces back and forth in front of the fireplace. “You saw what I did to Cole. I thought you’d be appalled.”

Watching him, I don’t think I’m the one who’s appalled here. I think *Jaxon* is—by what he’s capable of and by what he’s just done. Which makes my job of convincing him I’m not disgusted by him harder than I ever imagined it would be.

It also means I need to tread lightly.

“Is that the guy’s name? Cole?” I finally settle on asking.

I want to get closer to him, want to shrink the gap he’s put between us, but badass, take-no-prisoners Jaxon currently looks like he’ll bolt at the first wrong move I make.

“Yes.” He’s back to not looking at me, so I wait him out, refusing to speak until he finally, reluctantly turns his gaze back to mine.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he whispers.

“Like what?”

“Like you understand. You can’t possibly—”

“Did he deserve what you did to him?” I interrupt.

His whole body goes rigid. “That’s not the point.”

“Actually, I think it’s the most important point.” I’m not going to stand here and beat him up emotionally when he’s already doing a ridiculously good job of it himself. “Did he deserve it?” I ask again.

“He deserves worse than what he got,” Jaxon finally spits out. “He deserves to be dead.”

“But you didn’t kill him.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “But I wanted to.”

“It doesn’t matter what you wanted to do,” I admonish him. “It only matters what you did. You never once lost control when you were going after Cole—in fact, I’ve never seen anyone more in control than you were in that lounge. The power you wield... it’s unfathomable.”

He quirks a brow at me even as his shoulders tense, as if preparing for the next body blow. “And terrifying?”

“I’m pretty sure Cole was terrified.”

“I don’t give a shit about Cole. I’m talking about you.” He shoves a frustrated hand through his hair, but this time his gaze never leaves mine.

I take a deep breath, let it out slowly. Then tell him the truth he so desperately needs to hear. “You don’t scare me, Jaxon.”

“I don’t scare you.” His tone is half sardonic, half disbelieving.

I shake my head. “No.”

“No?”

“No,” I repeat. “And I’ve got to say, you’re beginning to sound an awful lot like a parrot.” I make a face at him. “You might try being careful of that if you want to keep your badass reputation intact.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “My badass reputation is pretty solid right now, thank you very much. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“Me? Why are you worried about me?” I’m sick of waiting on the other side of the room for him to calm down. Not when it’s not getting us anywhere, and not when the need to touch him, to hold him, is a physical ache inside me.

With that in mind, I finally take my hands out of my pockets and walk toward him, slowly, carefully, deliberately. His eyes get wider with every step I take, and for a second, I really do think he’s contemplating fleeing.

Not going to lie, the idea that I scare Jaxon Vega fascinates me on all kinds of different levels.

“What the fuck is happening here?” he demands after the silence between us has gone on too long.

I have no idea. I just know that I hate the way Jaxon looked when he walked up to me in the study lounge, hate even more the way he looked when he brought me into this room. Wary, lonely, ashamed, when I don’t believe he has anything to be ashamed of.

“What do *you* think is happening here?” I ask.

“Now who’s the parrot?” He shoves both hands into his hair in obvious frustration. “Are you okay? Are you in shock?”

“I’m fine. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“Me? I—” He breaks off and just stares at me, speechless, as he registers that I very deliberately mimicked his words. “I just terrorized the entire school. Why the hell are you worried about *me*?”

“Because you don’t exactly look happy about it, now, do you?”

“There’s nothing to be happy about.”

And that, right there, is exactly why I’m not afraid of him.

I’m only a few steps away from him now and I take them slowly, under his watchful, worried gaze. “So how *do* you feel about what just happened?” I ask.

His face closes up. “I don’t feel anything about it.”

“You sure about that?” Finally, I’m close enough to go for it. I reach for his hand, grab on tight. The second our skin touches, he jerks like he’s being electrocuted. But he doesn’t pull away. Instead, he just stands there and watches as I lace our fingers together. “Because you look like you feel a hell of a lot.”

He takes a step back even as he holds fast to my hand. “It had to be done.”

“Okay.” I take a step forward. If we keep this up, it’s not going to be long before I have him pinned against a bookcase the same way he had me pinned against that chess table on my very first day.

Poetic justice, if you ask me.

“You should go.” This time, he takes two steps back. More, he drops my hand.

I feel the loss of his touch keenly, but that doesn’t stop me from closing the distance once again.

Doesn’t stop me from reaching out and resting a hand on his hard biceps.

Doesn’t stop me from softly stroking my thumb up and down his inner arm. “Is that what you want?”

“Yes.” He nearly strangles on the word, but this time he doesn’t move away from my touch. From me.

And while there is a part of me that can’t believe I’m doing this, that I’m all but throwing myself at Jaxon, there’s another part of me just waiting for him to give in.

It’s the same part that’s encouraged by the fact that he’s barely coherent at this point.

The same part that can’t help but feel—and be happy about—the small tremor running through his body.

The same part that desperately wants to feel Jaxon’s mouth once again on my own and is determined not to leave here until I find out.

“I don’t believe you,” I whisper. And then I take the final step, closing the last of the distance between us and pressing my suddenly trembling body flush against his.

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” he tells me in a voice that’s low and tortured and anything but cold.

He’s right. I don’t have a clue how much I’m asking of him. But I know if I don’t ask, if I don’t push, I’ll never get another chance. This will be the end of the discussion.

More, it will be the end of us.

And I’m not ready for that. I don’t even know if there is an us, or what will happen in a day or a week or three months, if there

is. I only know that I'm not ready to walk away from him—or whatever happens next. Which is why I reach for him again and whisper, "So show me."

Long seconds pass, minutes maybe, and Jaxon doesn't move. I'm not sure he even breathes.

"Jaxon," I finally whisper when I can't take the agony of waiting. "Please." My mouth is nearly pressed against his.

Still no response.

My confidence—shaky at the best of times—is about to desert me completely. After all, there's nothing quite like throwing yourself at a boy and having him turn into a human statue to make a girl feel wanted.

But I've got one more attempt in me, one more chance to get Jaxon to understand that I trust him, no matter what he did in that hall. That I want him, vampire or not.

Two months ago, I would have walked away—run away, really—prepared to hide under my bed forever. But two months ago, my parents weren't dead, and I didn't yet realize just how fleeting, how fragile, life really is.

And so I swallow my fear and embarrassment as I slide my hand down Jaxon's arm to his hand. Once more, I lace our fingers together before lifting both our hands to my chest. I press his palm flush against my heart and murmur, "I want you, Jaxon."

Something flashes in his eyes. "Even knowing what I am?"

Confusion swirls through me. "I know *who* you are. That's what matters."

"You say that now, but you don't know what you're asking."

"So show me," I whisper. "Give me what I'm asking for."

His eyes darken, his pupils blown completely out. "Don't say that if you don't mean it."

"I mean it. I need you, Jaxon. I *need* you."

His jaw clenches, and his fingers tighten reflexively on mine.

“Are you sure?” he grinds out. “I need to know you’re sure. I don’t want to scare you, Grace.”

My knees tremble like some medieval heroine at the intensity in his voice, in his eyes. But I am not going to blow this now, not going to mess it up when I’m this close to getting what I want.

This close to having Jaxon as my own.

So I lock my knees in place, look him in the eye. And say as loud and clear as I have ever said anything in my life, “What scares me isn’t you being a vampire, Jaxon. What scares me is the idea that you’re going to walk away and I’m going to go my whole life without knowing what this could feel like.”

And just like that, Jaxon strikes. Hands grabbing, fangs flashing, body wrapping itself around me so quickly, I barely understand what’s happening. He whirls me around—my back to his front—tangles his hand in my hair, and pulls my head back.

And then sinks his teeth into my neck, right below my jaw.



Is That a Wooden Stake in Your Pocket or Are You Just Happy to See Me?

For one second, two, panic immobilizes me. Makes it so I can't feel, can't think, can't breathe as I wait...for pain, for emptiness, for death.

But as time goes by and the agony I'm expecting doesn't come, my adrenaline stops shooting like a geyser, and I realize that whatever Jaxon is doing to me doesn't hurt at all. In fact, it feels really, really...good.

Pleasure like molten honey pours through my veins, lighting up my nerve endings and swamping me with an intensity, a need I never imagined existed. My already weak knees give out entirely, and I sag against him, letting him hold me up with his long, lean body and firm arms as I tilt my head to give him better access.

He growls at the invitation, a deep, rumbling sound that burrows deep inside me even as the ground shakes a little beneath my feet. And then the pleasure increases, lighting me up, turning me inside out, making me tremble even as I forget how to breathe. How to be.

I press myself even more tightly against him, wind my arms up and over my head so that I can tangle my fingers in his hair. Cup his jaw in my palm. Push my skin more firmly against his

mouth as my eyes drift closed.

I'm desperate for more—desperate for Jaxon and whatever he wants to give me or take from me. But he's obviously got more control than I can even imagine, because just as the pleasure threatens to overwhelm me, he pulls back, pulls away, his tongue stroking softly over his bite marks. The caress sends a whole new volley of emotions straight through me.

I stay where I am, body resting against his, hands clutching onto whatever part of him I can reach, totally dependent on him to keep me from falling as little darts of pleasure continue to zing through me. They're followed by a creeping lassitude that makes it impossible for me to so much as lift my lids, let alone step away from Jaxon.

As if I would.

“Are you okay?” he murmurs against my ear, his voice soft and warm in a way I’ve never heard from him before.

“Are you kidding?” I answer just as softly. “I don’t think I’ve ever been this okay in my life. That was...amazing. *You’re* amazing.”

He laughs. “Yeah, well, being a vampire doesn’t come with many perks, so you’ve got to take them where you can find them.”

“Obviously.” Eyes still closed, I turn my head. Raise my face to his. Purse my lips. And pray Jaxon doesn’t shy away from me.

He doesn’t, his lips pressing against mine in a tender kiss that has my breath catching all over again, though for very different reasons. Moments pass, and he starts to lift his head, but I hold on, wanting just a little more of him.

Just a little more of this boy who has such power and such tenderness inside him.

He gives it to me, his mouth moving against mine, his tongue stroking along my bottom lip until, finally, I find the strength to let him go.

I pull back, open my eyes slowly, and find Jaxon staring down at me, his dark gaze filled with so much emotion, I don't know whether to laugh or weep.

"No one's going to hurt you again, Grace," he whispers.

"I know," I whisper back. "You made sure of it."

Surprise glows in the depths of his obsidian eyes. "I didn't think you believed—" He breaks off as the ground rumbles beneath our feet.

"We should get under the doorway," I tell him, glancing around for the closest one.

But he just closes his eyes, takes a deep breath. Moments later, the ground settles back down.

Shock explodes inside me. "You—" My voice breaks, and I clear my throat. Try again. "The earthquakes. They're you?"

He nods, looks wary.

"Even the big ones?" I ask, and I can feel my eyes going wide. "All of them?"

"I'm so sorry." His fingers stroke over my still-bandaged neck. "I never meant to hurt you."

"I know." I turn my head, kiss his palm even as astonishment continues to ricochet inside me. How can anyone be so powerful that they actually move the earth? It's incomprehensible, unimaginable. "Does this happen often?"

He shakes his head, shrugs, like he's as baffled as I am. "It's never happened...before."

"Before?" I ask.

"Before you." He pulls me more tightly against him. "I learned control early—over myself and my abilities. I had to or..."

"Cities would crumble?" I ask, tongue firmly in cheek.

"I wouldn't put it exactly like that. But I swear, I've got it under control now. I won't hurt you again." His mouth slides along my cheek, over my jaw, down my neck.

Heat moves through me at the first touch of his lips. It makes me tremble. Makes me want.

I pull his mouth back down to mine and let the need, and the pleasure, sweep me away.

The kiss goes on and on, until we're both breathless. Shaky. Desperate.

I arch against him in an effort to be closer, then run my hands over his arms, his shoulders, his back. My fingers tangle in his hair, and he groans low in his throat. Then bites down gently on my lip, sucking at it just a little, until it feels like the Fourth of July deep inside me.

I gasp, shudder, and Jaxon uses my still-weak knees as an excuse to pull away. I try to hold him in place, try to keep his lips and skin and body on mine. But he just smooths a hand over my hair and whispers, "Come on."

He takes my hand in his and tugs me toward his bedroom.

I follow him—of course I do—but as he leads the way, I can't help but notice that his once neat reading alcove is now an utter disaster.

Books cover the floor, some lying down, some standing up, some leaning drunkenly against furniture halfway in between. The couch is upside down and the gorgeous old coffee table I liked so much is now splintered into little more than wood chips.

"What—what happened?" I gasp, bending down to pick up a few books that are directly in my path.

Jaxon takes them from me with a shake of his head, tosses them onto the bottom of the couch, which is now facing up. "I promised you the earthquake thing isn't going to happen anymore," he answers. "But it's going to take a little time for me to figure out how to control all the things you make me feel."

"*This* is learning how to control it?" I step over a pile of rubble that I'm pretty sure used to be a bookcase and try to pretend his

words aren't making me melt deep inside.

He turns me inside out with a look, destroys me with a kiss. But this? This makes me feel like maybe, just maybe, he feels as much for me as I feel for him.

He shrugs. "The earth barely shook this time, and no window broke. That's definite progress."

"I guess." I swallow down the softness he makes bloom inside me and make a show of looking at the scattered wood chips instead. "I really liked that coffee table."

"I'll find you one you like more." He tugs on my hand. "Come on."

We make our way to his room, which thankfully seems to have been spared the destruction suffered by the reading alcove. It looks exactly the same as last time, complete with gorgeous paintings on the walls and musical instruments in the corner.

"I love your room," I tell him, trailing a hand over his dresser as I make my way to the drum kit. I resisted it last time, know I should resist it this time, since what has happened so far today has left us with a lot to talk about.

But it's been weeks since I've sat behind a kit, weeks since I've held a set of drumsticks in my hands, and I just need to touch it. Just need to run my hands over the skins.

"You play?" Jaxon asks as I rest my hand on the top of one of the toms.

"I used to, before..." I trail off. I don't want to talk about my parents right now, don't want to bring that sadness into my first conversation with Jaxon post...whatever that was.

He seems to get it, because he doesn't push. Instead, he smiles, really smiles, and it lights up his whole face. Lights up the whole room. Definitely lights up all the dark and sad places I've been holding on to for too long.

It isn't until I see his smile that I realize how much he's been

holding back, how much he's been holding *in* for who knows how long.

"Want to play something now?" he asks.

"No." It's my turn to hold a hand out to him. I pull him toward the bed, waiting until he chooses a side to sit on before I plop down on the other side. "I want to talk."

"About?" he deadpans even as a wariness creeps into his gaze that hasn't been there since he bit me.

"Oh, I don't know. The weather?" I tease because I'm trying to be nonchalant about this whole thing. Trying to tell myself that finding out the boy I'm falling for is a vampire who can literally shake the earth really isn't that big of a deal.

He rolls his eyes, but I'm watching closely and see the corners of his mouth turning up in the smile he's trying so hard to hide.

It makes the nonchalance totally worth it, even as I scramble with trying to wrap my head around everything that's happened today. And everything that's happened in the last six days. Because there is still a tiny part of me freaking out about the fact that I let a vampire bite me—even if that vampire is Jaxon. And even if I enjoyed it way more than I ever imagined I would.

But now is not the time for me to freak out, not when Jaxon is already so on edge. So I settle for giving him a playful *don't mess with me* look even as I lay down on one side of his bed.

Jaxon lifts a brow as he watches me make myself comfortable, then stretches out next to me. I don't miss the fact that he makes sure not to touch me at all as he does.

Which is completely unacceptable. I'm trying to close the distance between us, not make it bigger. But I appreciate the fact that he's working so hard not to freak me out. I just wish he realized that I'm not the one who's freaked out here.

But since I want to get the guarded look out of his eyes, I decide to tackle that subject later. For now, I'm going with, "Did

you hear the joke about the roof?"

"Excuse me?" He lifts a single disdainful brow—which means I have to work really hard to hide how googly-eyed it makes me when he does it.

"Never mind." I give him a cheesy grin. "It's over your head."

He stares at me, bemused, for several seconds. Then he shakes his head and says, "Somehow, they always get worse."

"You have no idea." I roll over until I'm on my stomach—and then scoot so the right side of my body is pressed to the left side of his. "What's the difference between a guitar and a fish?"

Both brows go up this time, even as he answers, "I don't think I want to know."

I ignore him. "You can tune a guitar but you can't tuna fish."

He lets out a bark of laughter that startles both of us. Then he shakes his head and tells me, "It's an actual sickness with you, isn't it?"

"It's fun, Jaxon." I give him the most obnoxious smirk I can manage. "You know what fun is, don't you?"

He rolls his eyes. "I think I have a vague recollection of that emotion, yeah."

"Good. What do you call a dinosaur that—?"

He cuts me off with a kiss and a yank. The kiss curls my toes, but the yank...the yank curls everything else. Especially when he pulls me over so that I'm on top of him, my knees straddling his hips and my curls forming a curtain around us.

Jaxon takes hold of a lock of my hair, then watches as the curl twines around his finger. "I love your hair," he says, pulling on the curl just to release it and watch it boing back into place.

"Yeah, well, I'm pretty fond of yours, too," I tell him, sliding my fingers through his black strands.

As I do, my palm brushes against his scar, and he stiffens before turning his head away so that I'm no longer touching it.

“Why do you do that?” I ask.

“Do what?”

I give him a look that says he knows exactly what I’m talking about. “I already told you that you’re the sexiest guy I’ve ever seen—and that includes a lot of pretty impressive San Diego surf gods. So I don’t understand why it bothers you so much if I see your scar.”

He shrugs. “It doesn’t bother me if you see my scar.”

I don’t think that’s true, but I’m willing to go with it—up to a point. “Fine, it doesn’t bother you if I see it, but it definitely bothers you if I touch it.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “That doesn’t bother me, either.”

“Okay, I’m sorry, but I call bullshit.” To prove it, I lean down and press a series of hot, openmouthed kisses against his jaw. I don’t deliberately touch his scar, but I don’t shy away from it, either. And sure enough, he lasts only a few seconds before threading his fingers through my hair and gently pressing my face into the bend where his shoulder meets his neck.

Before I can say anything, though, he takes a deep breath. Then says, “It’s not that I think you’ll be disgusted by my scar or anything—you’re not that shallow.”

“Then why does it bother you so much if I go near it?”

He doesn’t answer right away, and as silence stretches between us, I think maybe he won’t answer at all. But then, just when I’ve given up, he says, “Because it reminds me of how I got it, and I don’t want you anywhere near that world. And I sure as hell don’t want that world anywhere near you.”



Eventually the World Breaks Everyone

The pain in his voice has my heart thudding slow and hard in my chest.

Sure, there's a part of me that can't imagine what world he's talking about, considering I'm currently living in the middle of a fantasy novel—one complete with fantastical creatures and secrets galore. But there's a larger part of me that just wants him to know that whatever world he's talking about, and whatever happened to him in that world, I'm on his side.

I take my time running my palms over his chest and pressing kisses along the powerful column of his throat. He smells like oranges again, and deep water, and I sink into the scent of him, into the glorious taste and feel and sound of him.

His hands go to my hips, and he groans low in his throat as he arches against me. It feels amazing—he feels amazing. I've never been this intimate with a guy before, have never wanted to be, but with Jaxon, I want it all. I want to feel everything, experience everything. Maybe not now, when we're on borrowed time, but soon.

But I also want to know what's hurting him. Not so I can take it away—I know way better than that—but so I can share it

with him. So I can understand. Which is why I roll off him just as things are getting really interesting.

He rolls with me, of course, so that now we're stretched on our sides, facing each other. His arm is around my waist, his hand resting on my hip, and there's a part of me that wants nothing more than to sink back into him. To just let whatever's going to happen happen.

But Jaxon deserves better than that. And so do I.

Which is why I reach up and cup his unscarred cheek, then lean forward until our mouths are so close that we're breathing the same air. "Believe me, I understand better than most if you don't want to talk about what happened to you," I whisper. "But I need you to know that if you ever want to share what happened with me, I'm more than happy to listen."

My words aren't sexy and they definitely aren't slick, but they are sincere and they are heartfelt. Jaxon must sense it, too, because instead of dismissing me out of turn, as I half expected him to, he stares at me through eyes that show more than I ever imagined.

Then he kisses me—long, slow, deep—before rolling away and sitting up, with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. I sit up, too, and because I can't leave him alone in this... whatever this turns out to be, I wrap myself around him from behind as I press soft, quick kisses to his shoulders and the back of his neck.

And then I say, "Tell me," because I think he needs to hear me say that almost as much as he needs to tell me the story burning inside him.

I'm not sure how I expect the story to come out—whether in fits and starts or one smooth retelling—but I do know that I never could have anticipated what he says when he finally begins to speak.

“I killed Hudson.”

Shock rips through me. “Hudson? Your—”

“Brother. Yeah.” He wipes a hand over his face.

A million emotions go through me at those four words—shock that isn’t really shock, horror, sorrow, concern, pity, *pain*. The list goes on and on. But the one that stands head and shoulders above the others is disbelief. Dangerous as he is, I don’t believe Jaxon would ever deliberately harm someone he cares about. Everyone else might be open season, but not those he considers under his protection. If I’ve learned nothing else in the week I’ve been here, I’ve learned that.

Which means something really horrible must have happened. What must it be like to live with the kind of power he wields?

What must it be like to live with the knowledge that one careless moment, one slip of control, and he can lose everything?

“What happened?” I ask eventually, when minutes pass and he doesn’t say anything else.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does. I can’t imagine you hurting your brother on purpose.”

He turns on me then, eyes showing that yawning, empty blackness I’m coming to hate so much. “Then your imagination isn’t good enough.”

Fear skitters through me at the darkness in his voice. “Jaxon.” I lay a gentle hand on his arm.

“I didn’t set out to kill him, Grace. But do you really think intentions matter when someone’s dead? It’s not like you can just bring them back because you didn’t want to do it.”

“I know that better than most.” I’m still haunted by the fight my parents and I had right before they died.

“Do you?” Jaxon demands. “Do you know what it feels like to be able to wave a hand and do this?” Seconds later, everything

in the room, except for the bed we're sitting on, is floating in the air around us. "Or this?" Everything comes crashing to the ground. The guitar crumbles. One of the glass picture frames shatters into a million pieces.

I take a minute, let the shock cycle through before I try to say anything that makes sense.

"Maybe you're right," I eventually answer. "Maybe I don't know what any of that feels like. But I know your brother wouldn't want you beating yourself up over whatever happened to him. He wouldn't want you torturing yourself."

Jaxon's answering laugh is filled with actual humor. "It's pretty obvious you don't know Hudson. Or my parents. Or Lia."

"Lia blames you for Hudson's death?" I ask, surprised.

"Lia blames everyone and everything for Hudson's death. If she had the kind of power I do, her rage would burn down the world." This time when he laughs, there's only regret in the sound.

"What about your parents? Surely they don't hold you responsible for something you had no control over?"

"Who said I had no control? I had a choice. And I made it. I killed him, Grace. On purpose. And I would do it again."

My stomach churns at his admission—and the coldness in his voice as he makes it. But I've learned enough about Jaxon to know that he will always cast himself in the most awful light. That he will always choose to see himself as the villain, even if he's the victim.

Especially if he's the victim.

Pointing that out to him right now won't do any good, though, so I wait for him to say more. And there is more. If there wasn't, he wouldn't be so concerned with losing control and hurting me.

"Hudson was the firstborn," he eventually continues. "The prince who would be king. The perfect son who only grew more perfect after death."

There's no bitterness in the words, just a matter-of-factness that makes it way too easy to read between the lines. Still, I can't resist asking, "And you are?"

"Very definitely not." He laughs. "Which is fine. More than fine. Being king has never exactly been an aspiration of mine."

"King?" I ask, because when he first said it, I thought it was a metaphor. His brother the prince. But now that he said it again, in reference to himself being king, I can't not ask.

"Yes, king." He lifts a brow. "Didn't Macy tell you?"

"No." *King of what?* I want to ask, but now doesn't exactly seem like the time.

"Oh, well, here I am." He does a mock little bow. "The next vampire *liege* at your service."

"Ooookay." I don't know what else to say to that revelation. Except, "It was supposed to be Hudson? But now that he's dead..."

"Exactly." He makes a *you guessed it* clicking sound with the corner of his mouth. "I'm the replacement. The new heir apparent."

And future king. My mind boggles at the mere idea. What does a vampire king do, anyway? And is that why everyone treats Jaxon with such deference? Because he's royalty? But what does vampire royalty have to do with dragons? Or witches?

"I am, of course, also the murderer of the former heir apparent," Jaxon continues, "which in another species might cause some problems. But in the vampire world, you're only as strong as what you can defend...and what you can take. So all I had to do to become the most fearsome and revered vampire in the world was to kill my big brother."

He gives a little shrug that is supposed to show how amusing he finds the whole thing, how much he doesn't care.

I don't buy it for a second.

“But that’s not why you killed him,” I add, because I think he needs to hear me say it.

“I thought we already covered that motive doesn’t matter? Perception becomes truth eventually, even when it’s wrong.” There’s a wealth of pain in those four words, even though the tone Jaxon uses is completely devoid of emotion. *“Especially when it’s wrong. History is, after all, written by the winner.”*

I rest my head on his shoulder in a small gesture of comfort. “But you’re the winner.”

“Am I?”

I don’t have an answer for that, so I don’t even try. Instead, I ask for the truth. His truth. “Why did you kill Hudson?”

“Because he needed to be killed. And I’m the only one who could.”

The words hang in the air as I try to absorb them, to figure out what he means. “So Hudson was as powerful as you, then.”

“No one is as powerful as me.” He isn’t bragging. In fact, he sounds almost ashamed of the fact.

“Why is that exactly?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Genetics. Each generation of born vampires tends to be more powerful than the generation that came before them. There are exceptions, of course, but for the most part, that’s how it’s always been. It’s why there are so few of us—nature’s way of keeping the balance, I figure. And since my parents come from the strongest two families and wield incredible power themselves, it’s no surprise that when they mated, their offspring...”

“Can literally make the earth shake.”

He gives a half smile, the first I’ve seen from him since this conversation began. “Something like that, yeah.”

“So am I right in guessing that Hudson was not exactly responsible with his power?”

“A lot of young vampires aren’t.”

“That’s not an answer.” I raise a brow, wait for him to look at me. It takes longer than it should. “And you strike me as very responsible.”

He arches his own brows, takes a deliberate look around the disaster he made of the room when he was kissing me.

“You know what I mean.”

“I know what you think you mean. Hudson...” He sighs. “Hudson’s plans were always audacious. Always looking to give vampires more power, more money, more control, which isn’t bad in and of itself.”

I’m tempted to disagree. After all, if you plan on garnering more power, money, and control, it has to come from somewhere. And history has shown that taking any of those three things tends to be less than humane for the people it’s being taken from.

But that’s a discussion for another time, not now, when Jaxon is finally opening up.

“But somewhere along the line, he got lost in those plans,” Jaxon continues. “He got so concerned with what he could achieve and how he could achieve it that he never stopped to question if he should.

“I tried to pull him back, tried to talk reason to him, but with Lia and my mother whispering all kinds of *Chosen One* bullshit in his ear, it became impossible to reach him. Impossible to make him understand that his own brand of manifest destiny was not...acceptable, especially when those plans included...” His voice drifts off for a minute, and a look at his eyes tells me that mentally, Jaxon’s not here in this room anymore. He’s far away in another time and place.

“Things between vampires and shifters have always been tense,” he finally continues, a defensive note in his voice that I’ve never heard before. “We’ve never really gotten along with the wolves or the dragons; they don’t trust us and we sure as hell don’t

trust them. So when Hudson worked up a plan to”—he curls the fingers of his free hand and makes air quotes—“put the shifters in their place,’ a lot of people thought he was onto something.”

“But not you.”

“Going after the shifters looked and smelled an awful lot like prejudice to me. And then it began to look a lot like genocide. Especially when he started adding other supernatural creatures—and even made vampires—to his list. Things got ugly.”

“How ugly?” I ask, though I’m not sure I actually want to know the answer. Not when Jaxon looks more grim than I’ve ever seen him. And not when he’s throwing around words like “genocide.”

“Ugly.” He refuses to elaborate. “Especially with our history.”

Again the blanks in my knowledge base make it impossible to understand what history he’s referring to. Instead of asking, I make a mental note to check the library or ask Macy.

“I tried to reason with Hudson, tried to talk him down. I even went to the king and queen to see if they could do something with him.”

I note how he calls his parents the king and queen instead of Mom and Dad, and for a second, I flash back to the first day I met him. To the chess table and the vampire queen and the things he said about what I thought at the time was just a chess piece.

It all makes so much more sense now.

“They *couldn’t*.”

“They wouldn’t,” he corrects. “So I tried to talk to him again. So did Byron and Mekhi and a few of the others who would have graduated with him. He didn’t listen. And one day he started a fight that was set to rip the whole world apart, had it been allowed to continue.”

“That’s when you stepped in.”

“I thought I could fix things. I thought I could talk him down.

It didn't work out like that.

He closes his eyes, and it makes him seem so far away. Until he opens them again, and I realize he is even more distant than I imagined.

"Do you know what it's like to realize the brother you grew up revering is a total and complete sociopath?" he asks in a voice made more terrible by the reasonableness of it. "Can you imagine what it feels like to know that maybe if you hadn't been so blind, so caught up in your hero worship and seen him for what he was sooner, a lot of people would still be alive?

"I had to kill him, Grace. There was no other choice. Truth be told, I don't even regret doing it." He says the last in a whisper, like he's ashamed to even admit it.

"I don't believe that," I tell him. Guilt radiates off him, makes me hurt for him in a way I've never hurt for anyone before.

"I believe it was necessary. I believe you did what you had to do. But I don't believe for one second that you don't regret killing him." He's spent too much time torturing himself for that to be true.

He doesn't answer right away, and I can't help wondering if I said the wrong thing. Can't help wondering if I just made everything worse.

"I regret that he had to be killed," he finally says after a long silence passes between us. "I regret that my parents created him and molded him into the monster that he was. But I don't regret that he's gone now. If he wasn't dead, no one in the entire world would be safe."

My stomach plummets at his words. Instinctively, I want to deny them, but I've seen Jaxon's power. I've seen what he can do when he controls it and what it can do on its own when he can't. If Hudson's power was anything close—without Jaxon's morality to keep it in check—I can't imagine what might happen.

“Did you have the same power, or—”

“Hudson could persuade anyone to do anything.” The words are as flat as his tone. As his eyes. “I don’t mean he could con people; I mean that he had the power to make people do whatever he wanted them to do. He could make them torture another person, could make them kill anyone he wanted to. He could start wars and launch bombs.”

A chill runs up my spine at his words, has the hair on the back of my neck standing straight up. Even before he looks straight at me and continues. “He could make you kill yourself, Grace. Or Macy. Or your uncle. Or me. He could make you do anything he wanted, and he did. Over and over and over again.

“No one could stop him. No one could resist him. And he knew it. So he took whatever he wanted and planned for more. And when he decided he was going to murder the shifters, just wipe them out of existence, I knew he wouldn’t stop there. The dragons would go, too. The witches. The made vampires. The humans.

“He would destroy them all— just because he could.”

He looks away, I think because he doesn’t want me to see his face. But I don’t need to look in his eyes to know how much this hurts him, not when I can hear it in his voice and feel it in the tension of his body against mine. “There were a lot of people who supported him, Grace. And a lot of people willing to stand in front of him to protect him and the vision he had for our species. I killed a lot of them to get to him. And then I killed him.”

This time, when he closes his eyes and then opens them, the distance is gone. And in its place is the same resolve it must have cost for him to not only take on Hudson but also to beat him. “So, no, I don’t regret that I killed him. I regret that I didn’t do it sooner.”

When he finally turns back around to look at me, I can see

the pain, the devastation behind the emptiness in his eyes. It makes me ache for him in a way I've never ached for anyone, not even my parents. "Oh, Jaxon." I put my arms around him again, try to hold him, but his body is stiff and unyielding against my own.

"His death destroyed my parents, and it broke Lia into so many pieces, I don't think she'll ever recover. Before all this happened, she was my best friend. Now she can barely stand to look at me. Flint's brother died fighting Hudson's army in the same fight, and Flint's never been the same, either. We used to be friends, if you can believe it."

He takes a deep, shuddering breath and lets himself sink into me. I hold him as tightly as I can, for as long as he'll let me. Which isn't long at all. He pulls away well before I'm ready to let him go.

"Nothing has been the same since Hudson did what he did. The different species have been at war three times in the last five hundred years. This was almost number four. And though we stopped it before it got too far, the distrust for vampires that goes back centuries is right up front again.

"Add in the fact that a lot of people got an up-close-and-personal look at my power and no one's happy. And can you blame them? How do they know I won't turn like my brother did?"

"You won't." The certainty is a fire deep inside me.

"Probably not," he agrees, though it's hard to miss his qualification. "But this is why I warned you away from Flint, and it's why I had to do what I did in the study lounge. They've been gunning for you since you got here. I don't know why it started, if it's because you're human or if there's something I haven't figured out yet. But I'm sure that it's continued—and gotten worse—because you're mine."

The torment is back, worse than before. “It’s why I tried to stay away from you,” he adds, “but we both know how well that worked.”

“That’s it, isn’t it?” I whisper as so much of what he’s said and done since I first got here finally begins to make sense. “This is why you act the way you do.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” His face closes up, but there’s a wariness—and a yearning—in his eyes that says I’m on the right track.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.” I rest a hand on his cheek, ignoring the way he flinches when I touch his scar. “You act the way you do because you believe it’s the only way you can keep the peace.”

“*It is* the only way to keep the peace.” The words are torn from him. “We’re balanced on a razor-thin tightrope, and every day, every minute, is a balancing act. One wrong step in either direction, and the world burns. Not just ours but yours as well, Grace. I can’t let that happen.”

Of course he can’t.

Other people could walk away, could say it wasn’t their responsibility. Could tell themselves that there was nothing they could do.

But that’s not how Jaxon operates. Those aren’t the rules he lives by. No, Jaxon takes it all on his shoulders. Not just the mess Hudson created and left him with but everything that happened before it—and everything that’s happened since.

“So what does that mean for you?” I ask softly, not wanting to spook him any more than I already have. “That you have to give up everything good in your life just to keep things together for everyone else?”

“I’m not giving up anything. This is just who I am.” His hands clench into fists, and he tries to turn away.

But I won't let him. Not now, not when I'm finally understanding all the ways he's managed to torture himself—for Hudson's death and for this new role he doesn't want but can't turn away from.

"That's bullshit," I tell him softly. "You wear indifference like a mask; you wield coldness like a weapon—not because you feel nothing but because you feel too much. You've worked so hard to make everyone believe you're a monster that you've begun to believe it yourself."

"But you're not a monster, Jaxon. Not even close."

This time he doesn't try to turn away—he *jerks* away, like a live wire has just wrapped itself around his entire body. "You don't know what you're talking about," he growls.

"You think if people are scared enough, if they hate you enough, they won't dare to step out of line. They won't dare to start another war, because you'll finish that one, too—and them right along with it."

God. The pain, the loneliness, of his existence hits me like an avalanche. What must it feel like to be so alone? What must it feel like to—?

"Don't look at me like that," he orders in a voice as tight and thin as that high-wire he was just talking about.

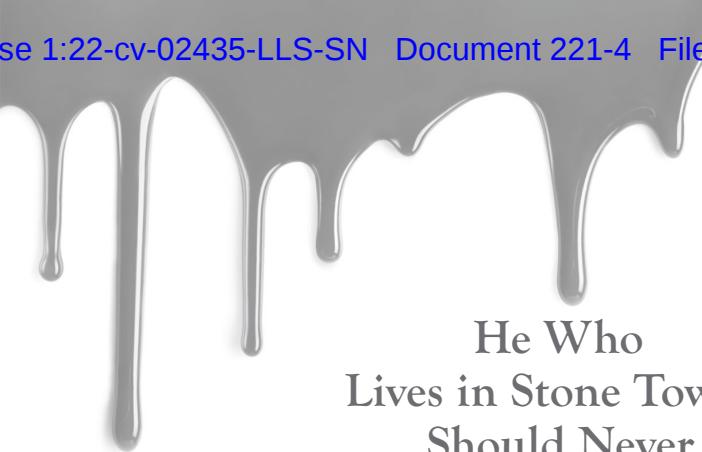
"Like what?" I whisper.

"Like I'm a victim. Or a hero. I'm neither of those things."

He's both of those things—and so many more besides. But I know he won't believe me if I try to tell him that. Just like I know he won't take any more comfort from me right now, not when I've just laid him open right here for both of us to see.

So I do the only thing I can do.

I tangle my hands in his hair, pull his mouth down to mine. And give him the only thing he'll accept from me.



He Who Lives in Stone Towers Should Never Throw Dragons

For a second, right after our mouths meet, everything goes away. What he told me about his brother, what he told me about my being in danger, everything. For these moments, as his lips move over mine—as his tongue explores my mouth and his teeth gently ravage my lower lip—all I can think about is him. All I can want and feel and need is Jaxon.

He must feel the same way, because he makes a noise deep in his throat as his arms come around me. And then he's picking me up just a little, lifting me until the curves of my body line up perfectly with all the hard, sexy planes of his. And soon the kiss I meant as comfort shifts to something else entirely.

His hands are on my hips, his chest and stomach and thighs pressing against my own, and all I can think of is *yes*. All I can think of is *more*.

More and more and more, until my head is fuzzy, my heart is practically pounding out of my chest, and the rest of me feels like one more slide of his hands or shift of his hips will make me shatter.

Just the thought has a low, needy sound pouring out of me, a sound that Jaxon responds to with a hard, sexy squeeze of his

hands on my hips. But then he's pulling away, lifting his mouth from mine, and lowering me slowly to the ground.

"No," I whisper, trying to hold on to him for as long as I can. "Please." I'm not even sure what I'm asking for at this point, only that I don't want this to end. I don't want Jaxon to go back to that cold, bleak place where he has banished himself for so long.

I don't want to lose him to that darkness anymore.

But he murmurs softly to me, brushes his lips over my cheek, my hair, the top of my shoulder. Then slowly, slowly eases back a little more.

"We won't have much longer before Foster gets here, and I want to talk to you before he does."

"Yeah, okay." I sigh, then bury my face against his chest as I take a couple of deep breaths.

He runs his hands up and down my back to soothe us both, I think, before finally settling me on the bed—with a little distance between us. "I want to talk to you about your safety."

Of course he does. "Jaxon—"

"I'm serious, Grace. We need to talk about this, whether you want to or not."

"It's not that I'm trying to dodge the conversation. I'm just saying, after what happened earlier, anyone who doesn't like me is probably going to keep it to themselves from now on. Even if they want to hurt you."

He gives me a look. "I told you, this isn't all about me. If it was, Flint wouldn't have tried to kill you on your second day here. There wasn't anything between us then, so he couldn't have been trying to get to me. Which means—"

I finally recover from the shock ricocheting through me enough to interrupt him. "What are you talking about? Flint didn't try to kill me. He saved me. He's my friend."

"He's not."

“Yes, he is. I know you don’t like him, but—”

“Who told you to walk under that chandelier, Grace?” Jaxon asks with watchful eyes.

“Flint did. But it wasn’t like that.” Still, uneasiness stirs in my belly. It’s one thing to believe nameless strangers are out to get me. It’s another to think that one of the few people I call a friend here is... “Flint wouldn’t do that. Why would he try to drop a chandelier on me after he saved me when I fell off that branch?”

“That’s what I was trying to tell you. He didn’t save you.”

“That’s impossible—he wasn’t even on the branch with me.”

Jaxon narrows his eyes in an *are you kidding me* kind of way. “He wasn’t underneath the chandelier with you, either.”

“So what? He got one of the shifters to half break the branch before the snowball fight, knowing it was going to be windy?”

“More like he got one of his dragon friends to start the wind that caused all the problems. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, Grace. The dragons can’t be trusted, and Flint absolutely can’t.”

“That makes no sense. Why would he dive off that tree branch to keep me from hitting the ground if he was trying to kill me?”

Jaxon doesn’t answer.

My stomach tightens up as something horrible occurs to me. “He did save me from falling, didn’t he?”

Jaxon doesn’t answer. Instead, he looks away, his jaw working for several seconds before he finally says, “It was Cole who was responsible for dropping that chandelier, but it’s a hell of a coincidence that Flint made sure you were walking in that direction instead of sitting with the witches. And I don’t believe in coincidences. As soon as I prove it, I’m taking care of him, too.”

The uneasiness becomes a full-fledged sickness as I remember the look on Flint’s face after I thanked him for not letting me splat all over the snow. And how fast Jaxon got there after I fell.

“You’re still not answering the question I asked you, Jaxon. Did Flint jump out of that tree to save me or did you somehow *knock* him out of that tree?”

Jaxon avoids my eyes for the second time in as many minutes. Then says, “I wasn’t near the tree.”

It’s my turn to grind my teeth together. “Like that would stop you...”

“Well, what was I supposed to do?” he demands, throwing his arms up in the air with as much emotion as I’ve ever seen from him. “Let you fall? I figured if I stopped you in midair and brought you gently to the ground, it would freak you out even worse—not to mention leave you with a bunch of questions no one was prepared to answer.”

“So you made Flint dive after me instead?”

“I threw him under you, yes. And I’d do it again. I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe, even if that means taking on every shifter in this place. Especially any of the dragons who might have the power to kick up a wind like the one that broke that branch.”

Oh my God. Flint didn’t save me. For a second, I think I’m going to throw up. I thought he was on my side. I thought we were friends.

“I’m sorry,” Jaxon tells me after several seconds. “I don’t want to hurt you. But I can’t have you trusting him or any of the other shifters when they’re trying to hurt you. Especially when I don’t know why yet.”

“All the shifters,” I say, thinking again about what went down in the study lounge. “Including the alpha.”

“Including the alpha.”

I don’t know what to say to him right now, especially considering everything he’s done to keep me safe from that very first night. Even before he knew that we were going to matter

to each other. It's that thought that drives me to rest my head in the crook of his neck. And whisper, "Thank you."

"You're *thank*ing me?" he demands, stiffening beneath the kisses I keep pressing into the sharp line of his jaw—and the scar he works so hard to keep hidden. "For what?"

"For saving me, of course." I pull him closer, skim my lips over his cheek and along the scar that started this whole discussion, dropping a kiss every couple of centimeters or so. "For not caring about the credit and only caring about making sure I'm okay."

He's sitting rigidly now, his spine ramrod straight with discomfort over what I'm doing. What I'm saying. But I don't care. Not now, when he's in my arms. Not now, when I'm overwhelmed by the feelings I have inside me for him.

It's those feelings that have me climbing onto his lap. Those feelings that have me straddling his hips with my knees on either side of his thighs and my arms wrapped tight around his neck.

And those feelings that bring us right back to where we were before Jaxon called a halt—with me kissing him and kissing him and kissing him. Long, slow, lingering touches of my lips to his brow, his cheek, the corner of his mouth. Over and over, I kiss him. Taste him. Touch him. Over and over, I whisper all the things I like and admire about him.

Slowly—so slowly that I almost don't notice it at first—he relaxes against me. The rigidness leaves his spine. His shoulders curve forward just a little. The hands that were fisted on the bed loosen up and wrap themselves around my waist.

And then he's kissing me, too, really kissing me, with open mouth and searching tongue and hungry, desperate hands. He pushes closer, and I arch against him, pressing my mouth into his until his breath becomes my breath, his need becomes my need.

I slide my hands under his shirt, stroking my fingers along his smooth skin and the lean muscles of his back. Jaxon groans a

little as I do, arching into my touch. And then my phone goes off at the exact same time there's a heavy pounding on Jaxon's door...

The sounds break the spell between us, and he pulls away with a laugh. I hold tight to him, not ready to let him go. Not ready for this to end. He must feel the same way, though, because his hands tighten on my waist even as he presses his forehead to mine.

"You should get your phone," he says as it continues to ring. "Foster's probably freaking out because he doesn't know where you are."

The pounding on the door grows harder, more commanding. "Or he's freaking out because he knows *exactly* where I am."

"Yeah, there's that, too." He grins at me, his hands lingering on my waist for just a second as I start to climb off his lap. "You want to get the door or should I?"

"Why would I...?" Horror sweeps through me. "You don't think my uncle is the one pounding on the door, do you?"

"Not sure who else you think it would be, considering his beloved niece was last seen in the company of the guy who just picked a fight with every wolf shifter in the school."

"Oh my God." I look around for a mirror so I can fix my hair just enough that it doesn't look like I've spent the last hour making out with a vampire, then kind of stop in shock as I realize that there's nothing even resembling a mirror in here. "So are the old stories true?" I demand, combing my hair with little more than my fingers and a prayer. "Vampires really can't see themselves in mirrors?"

"We really can't."

"How is that possible?" I tuck my shirt in and make sure my hoodie is pulled down over my hips. "I mean, how do you know what you look like?"

He holds up his phone. "Selfie, anyone?" He moves toward

the door, which is practically vibrating under the force of my uncle's knocks. "Is this seriously what you want to talk about right now?"

A little bit, actually. Now that the whole vampire thing is out in the open, I realize I have a million questions. Things like how long do born vampires live—or are they immortal, like the stories suggest? Which leads me to wonder if born vampires age the same way, or is this a baby Yoda thing, where their maturation is much slower than non-magical humans? And if it is, exactly how old is Jaxon? Also, did Mekhi not come into my room today because he was being respectful or because he couldn't cross the threshold without an invitation?

There are more questions buzzing in my brain—so many more—but Jaxon is right. Now isn't exactly the time to be thinking about any of this.

"Of course not." I nod toward the door. "Open it and let's get this over with."

"It'll be fine," he promises with a wicked little grin that makes me think it will be anything but.

Especially if Uncle Finn is anything like my father. Then again, the guy's a witch and runs a school for the supernatural... so probably not that much in common after all.

"It will be whatever it is," I tell him, aiming for Zen and sounding completely out of touch instead. But come on, it's hard not to freak out when I'm pretty sure the boy I'm crazy about is going to be expelled.

Jaxon winks at me, even blows me a kiss, before rearranging his face into blankness as he throws open the door.

"Nice of you to let me in," my uncle says dryly. "So sorry you felt the need to hurry."

"Sorry, Foster, but Grace *did* have to get her clothes back on."

"Jaxon!" I gasp, my cheeks turning I can't even imagine what

shade of red. “I was fully dressed, Uncle Finn. I swear.”

“This is what you want to lead with after that stunt you just pulled?” my uncle demands. But before Jaxon can answer, he turns on me. “I thought you were heading back to your room more than an hour ago?”

“I was. But I got...”

“Sidetracked?” my uncle finishes for me with a raised brow.

At this point, I’m pretty sure the blush has taken over my entire body. Including my eyelashes and hair. “Yeah.”

“If you’re well enough to be up here, you’re probably well enough to be in class, don’t you think?”

“Yeah. I probably am.”

“Good.” He glances at his watch. “First period should be about half done right now—we are squeezing it in before lunch due to the chandelier incident...and other things.” He glares at Jaxon. “You should head there now.”

I think about arguing, but he’s got the same look on his face my dad used to have when I pushed him to the limit. I want to stay with Jaxon, want to know what’s going to happen to him, but I’m afraid if I put up a fuss now, it will just make my uncle angrier. And that’s the last thing I want if he’s about to decide Jaxon’s fate.

So instead of demanding to stay as I want to do, I just nod and head into the bedroom to grab my purse from where Jaxon dropped it. “Yes, Uncle Finn.”

For a second, I could swear that surprise flashes in my uncle’s eyes, but it’s gone so fast that I’m not sure I didn’t imagine it. Then again, Macy doesn’t exactly strike me as the biddable type, so maybe he didn’t expect me to agree so easily. Or he was surprised my purse was in Jaxon’s bedroom, which...I am going to choose not to think about.

Either way, it’s too late to argue now, so I turn to Jaxon. “I’ll

see you later?” I deliberately avoid making eye contact with my uncle as I wait for his response.

“Yeah.” His tone says *obviously*, even if he keeps his words simple in deference to my uncle. “I’ll text you.”

It’s not quite the response I was hoping for, but again, I’m not in a position to argue. So I just give him a little smile as I head for the door.

And try not to panic when the last thing I hear before Uncle Finn slams it closed is, “Give me one reason not to ship your ass to Prague, Vega. And make sure it’s a good one.”



Trial by Dragon Fire

I pull out my phone on the way down the stairs to Brit Lit and find about twenty text messages waiting for me. Five from Heather, complaining about how boring school is without me, along with several photos of her in her costume for the fall play.

I fire off a text telling her how great she looks dressed as the Cheshire Cat and another one sympathizing with the boredom. I want to tell her about Jaxon—not the vampire stuff, just the cute boy stuff—but that’s a subject I know I shouldn’t open until I decide exactly what I can or can’t tell my bestie about him. Because when Heather is on the trail for new information, she’s utterly relentless.

Plus, I’ve never lied to her, and I don’t really want to start now. I mean, logic says that if I’m going to be with Jaxon, I’m going to have to lie sometimes—I can’t walk around announcing to the world that he’s a vampire without us having to dodge a lot of wooden stakes and garlic. But I need to think about what I’m going to say. I’m a terrible liar at the best of times. When talking to Heather? I’ll crack in ten seconds flat, and that can’t happen.

Which is why I don’t say anything more than I absolutely have

to, even though a part of me is dying for her opinion about...oh, I don't know, everything hot-guy related.

Most of the other texts are from Macy—there are seven of them talking about what happened in the study room. She wasn't there, but the news of what Jaxon did to the wolf alpha has obviously spread. Not that I expected any different; he did it publicly for a reason. Plus Uncle Finn showing up at the tower shows just how far and fast the news traveled.

And Uncle Finn sent several texts to me as well, all of them demanding to know where I was. I don't bother to answer, considering he already found me—much to my chagrin.

The last two texts are from Flint, and I'm so shocked—and annoyed—I nearly miss a step and fall on my face. But then I remember the asshole dragon doesn't know what I know. He doesn't have a clue that I know he's been trying to kill me instead of help me.

It still pisses me off, though—the whole thing does—so I don't bother answering him. I swear to myself that I'll never answer him again, no matter what explanation he comes up with and no matter how many excuses he tries

Part of me wants to find him right now and have it out. But I've finally made it to Brit Lit, only to realize that I've totally forgotten to change into my school uniform. So I shove my phone back into the front pocket of my hoodie and head up to my room to do a super-quick change. Ten minutes later, I walk into class only to have the whole room go eerily silent the moment everyone spots me. You'd think I'd be used to that after the last week, but today, with everything that's happened, it feels a million times more awkward than usual.

But honestly, it's not like I can blame them. If I wasn't me, I'd be staring, too. I mean, come on, supernatural or not, they're still high school kids and I am still the girl who just caused a

fight between the alpha wolf and the most powerful vampire in existence.

It'd be stranger if they didn't stare.

That knowledge doesn't make the walk across the room to my desk any easier, though. Even with Mekhi giving me a supportive smile.

"We just started act 4, scene 5," he tells me in a soft undertone as I slide into my desk. "You can share my book."

"Thanks," I answer, pulling a pen and a small notebook out of my purse. I have no idea why I didn't grab my backpack before heading down here, but I didn't, so this is going to have to do.

"Everyone's taking a turn reading today, Grace," the instructor informs me from her spot at the front of the classroom. "Why don't you read Ophelia in this scene?"

"Okay," I answer, wondering why I have to play the damsel in distress. Because I've already read the play, I know this is the scene where Ophelia goes mad—or at least, where the audience gets to see her insanity for the first time. I try not to take it personally that she seems to think I'm the right one for the job...

Mekhi is playing Laertes, my brother, which makes it a little easier to read the lines of an insane girl who has just lost her father and feels all alone in the world. But I still struggle to get through them, especially the lines toward the end.

"There's a daisy: I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died: they say he made a good end—For bonny sweet Robin is all my joy."

Mekhi reads Laertes's line—obviously concerned about the state of my mental health. And by *my*, I mean Ophelia's, I remind myself as I move into softly singing my last lines in the scene—and the play. "And will he not come again? And will he not come again? No, no, he is dead; Go to thy death-bed: He never will come again—"

The bell rings before I finish her lines, and I stop as the rest of the class starts shoveling their books into their backpacks as fast as they can go. “Thank you, Grace. Tomorrow, we’ll pick up where you left off.”

I nod, then shove everything back into my purse, doing my best not to think about the death scene I just read. Doing my best not to think about my parents—and about Hudson. About Jaxon’s grief over who Hudson was and what that forced him to do.

It’s harder than I want it to be, especially when I realize my World History of Witchcraft Trials (and yeah, okay, now that I know about the whole paranormal thing, classes like this one make a lot more sense) is next.

It’s not the class that bothers me; it’s the walk through the creepy-as-fuck tunnels. Especially now that I wonder what would have happened to me down there alone with Flint if Lia *hadn’t* come along when she did.

But I’ve got to get to class, so it’s no use spending too much time dwelling on might-have-beens. Especially now that Jaxon has pretty much made me untouchable. What happened in that lounge might have been horrifying to witness, but I’m not going to lie. The fact that I no longer have to be afraid of chandeliers falling on my head or random shifters shoving me out into the snow isn’t a bad thing.

And when Mekhi walks with me down the hall instead of racing off to his next class, I realize that Jaxon’s protection extends even further than I thought. The threat was made—and I’m pretty sure heeded, judging by the wide berth everyone is giving me at the moment—and still it’s not enough for him. Still, he wants to make sure I’m safe, so much so that he’s called in other members of the Order to ensure I am.

Maybe it should bother me.

And honestly, if this was a normal school or a normal situation, it would probably bug the hell out of me to have such a protective...boyfriend? But I'm currently surrounded by shifters, vampires, and witches—all of whom play by rules I don't have a clue about. Plus, it's been less than three hours since a chandelier nearly crushed me to death. Not accepting Jaxon's and Mekhi's protection would be foolish, at least until things calm down around here.

I turn to thank Mekhi for walking with me, then freak out a little when Flint pretty much shoves his way between us. "Hey, Grace. How are you feeling?" he asks, all sweetness and concern. "I've been worried about you this morning."

"Worried about me or worried that the chandelier didn't do its job well enough?" I query, walking faster in what I already know is a useless attempt to get away from him.

He doesn't stop walking, but everything about him kind of stills when I confront him with what Jaxon told me—which tells me all *I* need to know.

And still, he tries to play it off. "What do you mean? Of course I'm worried about you."

"Give me a break, Flint. I know what you've been up to."

For the first time in our entire "friendship," anger flashes in his eyes. "Don't you mean you know what that tick told you I was up to?" he sneers.

Mekhi's face goes livid at the insult to Jaxon, and suddenly he's right there between the two of us again. "Back the fuck off, Dragon Boy."

Flint ignores him and continues talking to me. "You don't know what's really going on, Grace. You can't trust Jaxon—"

"Why? Because you say so? Aren't you the one who's been trying to kill me since I got here?"

"It's not for the reasons you think." He shoots me a pleading

look. “If you would just trust me—”

“Not for the reasons I think?” I repeat. “So you actually think there are good reasons for trying to kill me? And you still want *me* to trust *you*?” I wave an arm his way in a *step right up* kind of gesture. “Fine. Then tell me the truth about what happened during the snowball fight. Did you jump out of that tree to catch me, or did Jaxon knock you out of it?”

“I... It wasn’t like... Jaxon overreacted. I was—”

I let him stutter all over himself for a few seconds, then cut him off. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Stay away from me, Flint. I don’t want to have anything to do with you from now on.”

“Well that’s too bad, because I’m not going away.”

“You know, there’s a name for a guy who continues to hound a girl after she tells him to leave her alone,” Mekhi tells Flint after we make the turn into the hallway that leads to the tunnels.

Flint ignores him. “Grace, please.” He reaches out and grabs hold of my arm. Before I can tell him not to touch me, Mekhi is right there, fangs bared and warning growl pouring out of his throat.

“Get your filthy dragon hands off her,” he hisses.

“I’m not going to hurt her!”

“Damn right you’re not. Step back, Montgomery.”

Flint makes a frustrated sound deep in his throat, but in the end, he does what Mekhi asks. Mostly, I think, because there was going to be a fight right here in the hallway if he didn’t. One where Mekhi tries to tear him to pieces.

“Come on, Grace,” he implores. “It’s important. Just listen for one minute.”

I stop because it’s fairly obvious at this point that he isn’t planning on going away. “Fine. You want to talk, talk. What’s so important?” I cross my arms over my chest and wait to see what he has to say.

“You want me to say it now? In front of everyone?” he snarls, looking at Mekhi.

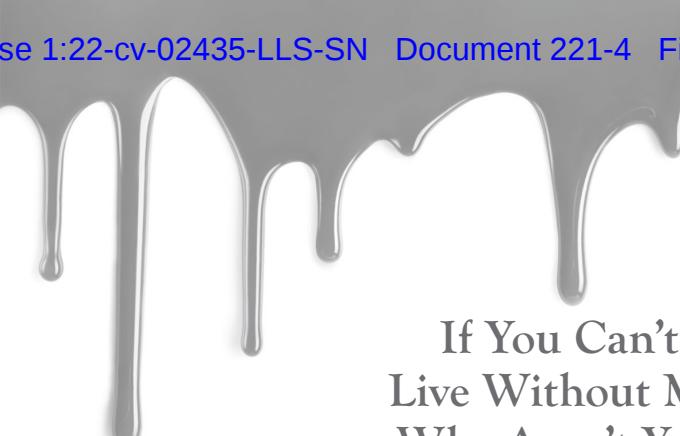
“Well, I’m sure as hell not going to go somewhere alone with you at this point. I may be ignorant about your world, but I’m not downright foolish.”

“I can’t do this. I—” He breaks off, runs a frustrated hand through his hair. “I can’t talk to you in front of a vampire. It needs to be alone.”

“Then you’re not talking to her at all,” Mekhi says, once again getting between us. “Let’s go, Grace.”

I allow Mekhi to guide me away from an increasingly angry Flint. Which is kind of obnoxious when you think about it. He’s the one who tried to kill *me* with a chandelier, and now *he*’s the one who gets to be angry? Where’s the logic in that?

“Damn it, Mekhi, at least do me a favor and don’t leave her alone, okay?” Flint calls after us. “I’m serious, Grace. You shouldn’t go anywhere alone. It’s not safe.”



If You Can't Live Without Me, Why Aren't You Dead Yet?

The irony of that statement isn't lost on me. Nor is it lost on Mekhi, if the way he snarls at Flint is any indication. "No shit, Sherlock. What do you think is happening here?"

Flint doesn't answer, and I don't bother to look back as Mekhi and I head into the tunnels. He doesn't say anything about Flint or anything else as we make our way through the first door. But the silence only makes me feel worse about what just happened. And about trusting Flint from the beginning, especially when Jaxon warned me not to.

I just wish I knew what he got out of hurting me when I've never done anything to him. *Not to mention playing at being my friend at the same time he was plotting to kill me.*

"Who knows with dragons?" It's not until Mekhi answers that I realize I spoke out loud. "They're super secretive, and nobody ever really knows what's going on with them."

"Apparently." I give him a shaky smile. "I really am sorry about all this—and about you having to walk me to class. I do appreciate it, though."

"No worries. It takes a lot more than a bad-tempered dragon to ruin my day. Besides, if I end up a couple of minutes late to

Calculus, you'll only be doing me a favor." He grins down at me as we follow the route into the tunnels.

As we make our way through all the doors, including stops for the security codes and the rest of the stuff I had to do with Flint, I'm struck by how different it feels with Mekhi. With Flint, everything inside me was screaming a warning, telling me to get the hell away from him as fast as I could.

With Mekhi, this trip into the tunnels feels normal. No, better than normal. Like walking with an old friend, one I'm totally comfortable around. There's no voice warning me to be careful, no uncomfortable shiver running down my spine. All of which tells me the bad feelings were tied to Flint and not the tunnel all along.

Still, I wait for that same voice to kick in as we go deeper into the tunnel. If not in warning, then at least a little self-congratulatory rumba for staying alive against all odds. Something that proves I'm not crazy for thinking I hear a voice deep inside myself that tells me what to do.

I admit, I've never had anything like it before, just the normal conscience-type stuff we all have when I'm trying to decide between right and wrong. But what happened the last time I was down here is different. In some ways, it felt almost sentient, like it existed away from my own consciousness and subconscious.

I can't help wondering what's actually going on. Can't help wondering just what Jaxon or Katmere Academy or freaking Alaska itself has woken up within me.

If anything.

I will say that whatever's happening, I'm at least glad the feeling of doom is gone. For now, I'm just going to accept that it is and worry about the rest when I've had a chance to breathe for a little while—which won't happen until I know for sure what Uncle Finn has decided about Jaxon.

Jaxon didn't act like he was afraid of being expelled, but that doesn't mean much. He doesn't strike me as being afraid of anything, let alone what the headmaster of his high school might do to him. But just because he didn't look worried doesn't mean Uncle Finn doesn't have the power to make him leave school temporarily...or for good.

I check my phone as we walk through the last gate into the tunnels. Still no text from Jaxon.

"Have you heard from him?" I ask as we start the long trek to the art building.

"No."

"Is that normal? I mean, does he usually check in with you or—"

I break off as Mekhi laughs. "Jaxon doesn't check in with anyone, Grace. I thought you would have figured that out by now."

"I did. I just... What do you think is going to happen?"

"I think Foster is going to give him a slap on the wrist and then move on."

"A slap on the wrist?" I don't even try to hide my shock. "He nearly killed that boy."

"*Nearly killed* and *killed* are two very different things here—in case you haven't noticed." He gives me a knowing look. "At some point, we all screw up learning how to deal with our powers."

"Yeah, but this wasn't a screwup. This was a calculated attack."

"Maybe." Mekhi shrugs. "But it was also necessary. I don't think Foster will blame Jaxon for trying to protect you. Or be shortsighted enough to send him away when he's the one standing between you and God knows what. In my opinion, the wolf alpha is more at risk for being kicked out than Jaxon is."

"School rules aren't all about me, even if the headmaster is my uncle. Besides, I thought Jaxon was the whole reason the shifters were after me. Because they wanted payback for everything that

went on with Hudson?"

I mean, what else could it be? I've never done anything to any of these people, nor is there anything supernatural about me. No powers, no shifting, no sudden desire to bite people's necks. So unless they're playing a rousing game of Terrorize the Human, I can't imagine what the shifters could possibly get out of trying to kill me.

"Jaxon's operating under that assumption, which makes sense, considering they've just been waiting to find something that matters to him. Waiting for something they can take away from him."

My heart beats a little faster at Mekhi's words—and the implication that everyone knows that I'm who Jaxon cares about. It's probably ridiculous to be so excited at the thought, since if it's true, those feelings put a big red *X* right on me. But after the time I spent with Jaxon in his room today, I don't care nearly as much as I should. I want to be with him.

"So what was Hudson like?" I ask Mekhi as we reach the back part of the tunnels. Maybe it's an indelicate question to ask, but how else am I supposed to find out anything about Jaxon's relationship with his brother? I'm pretty sure he's not going to tell me.

Mekhi glances down at me, and there's something different in the look he gives me, something wary and fearsome at the same time. It's so similar to the look Jaxon had when he was talking about Hudson—minus the palpable anguish—that it makes me wonder just who this guy was. And how his presence can be so keenly felt even after he's been dead for nearly a year.

"Hudson was...Hudson," Mekhi says with a sigh. "I guess the best way to describe him would be as a light version of Jaxon."

"A light version?" That's not what I was expecting, especially after what Jaxon had to say about him earlier. "I thought he was

a..." I trail off because I don't want to call the former heir to the vampire throne a monster, even though that's exactly what I'm thinking.

"Not light as in sunshine," Mekhi elaborates as we reach the center rotunda of the tunnels. "I mean Jaxon lite. He was the older brother and pretty much the prodigal son—their parents adored him. And so did a lot of other important people in our species.

"But being able to fool people into thinking you have character isn't the same as actually having character. And the one thing I know for sure is that Hudson wasn't a quarter of the person Jaxon is. Too selfish, too egotistical, too opportunistic. All Hudson cared about was Hudson. He was just good at pretending to care about what those in power wanted him to care about."

I don't know what to say to that, so in the end I don't say anything. After all, I never met Hudson, and I don't care about him in the slightest, beyond the fact that Jaxon is using his brother's death to punish himself.

But I've got to admit, Mekhi's description sounds awfully close to what I figured out reading between the lines of what Jaxon was telling me. He's beating himself to hell and back for what happened between them, but it sounds to me like he did the world a favor taking Hudson out of it. No matter what Jaxon thinks about it.

A noise sounds far behind us, and suddenly Mekhi is shoving me in back of him as he whirls around, hands raised in an obvious fighting stance. Which he drops once he realizes the noise came from Lia, who is racing up the tunnel toward us.

And by racing, I mean really booking it. Wow, she can move fast when she wants to. I mean, that's no surprise—I've seen Jaxon move, and it's a little shocking how quickly he can get to me when he wants to.

But so far, every time he moves like that, it's because I'm in some kind of trouble and he wants to get to me. The same kind of trouble that keeps me from paying close attention to him because I'm afraid I'm in the middle of trying not to die.

Watching Lia run without any safety fears for myself, though? It's intense. It takes her less than a minute to cover the tunnel we just spent the last five minutes walking down.

And when she gets to us? She isn't even breathless.

"Hey, girl, where's the fire?" Mekhi asks as she moves to pass right by us. I'm surprised at his tone, and the fact that a lot of the warmth he has when he talks to me is now absent.

Of course, she isn't exactly dripping friendliness herself when she answers, "Oh, hey, guys. Just using my free period to do some extra time in the art studio."

Mekhi raises a brow. "Since when do you use your free period for anything productive?"

She looks away, jaw working, and for a second, I'm pretty sure she isn't going to answer him. But then she shrugs and says, "I'm working on a painting of Hudson."

"So that's who it is," I exclaim, thinking back on the portrait I saw her working on yesterday. "He's really good-looking."

"You have no idea." Her lips curve in the closest thing I've seen to a smile from her. "I'm nowhere near talented enough to do him justice."

"False modesty?" Mekhi mocks. "That's not like you, Lia."

"I'd say bite me," she answers with an eye roll, "but who knows where you've been."

"Thanks, but I'm too afraid of catching rabies to ever bite you," he sneers back.

And can I just say, wow. There are enough bad vibes flowing between them that I can't help thinking I'm about to witness my second vampire attack of the day.

Apparently, when her relationship went bad with Jaxon, it went bad with the rest of the Order, too, because right now, Mekhi honestly looks like he wants to rip her throat out.

But just when I'm trying to determine how to get out of range, Lia flips him off. Then hooks her arm through mine and says, "Let's go, Grace. He's so not worth it."

"Oh, well, actually, Mekhi was just walking me to class." I don't like being in the middle of the two of them, but that doesn't mean I'm going to bail on Mekhi the first chance I get.

The warning bell chooses that exact moment to ring, and Mekhi gives a little shrug as he takes a step back. "I'm good heading to Calculus if you're good with Lia showing you the rest of the way."

"I'm pretty sure I can get her to class safely," Lia snarks, but I just smile my gratitude at him.

I like that Mekhi isn't making a big deal of the *me not being alone* thing, just kind of making sure all the bases are covered without putting up too big a fuss. Especially since Jaxon has already covered the giant-fuss department.

"I'm good," I tell him, and I mean it. Down here, surrounded by people Jaxon trusts—even if they don't trust each other—makes everything else that's happened so much easier to deal with. "You should get to math."

"Words absolutely no normal person has ever wanted to hear," he answers with a sigh. But he steps back, does a little two-fingered salute as a goodbye wave.

Impulsively, I close the distance between us to give him a hug. "Thanks for walking with me. I really appreciate it."

He seems a little taken aback by my very human show of emotion, so I pull away, worried that I did something wrong. But when I look up at him, he's got a goofy smile on his face that says he doesn't mind at all. And that's before he pats my head

like I'm a prize-winning Chihuahua or something.

Still, it feels pretty good to have one of Jaxon's friends' stamp of approval, so I just grin at him and do that ridiculous two-fingered salute back at him.

He laughs, then snarls a little at Lia—for show, I think—before turning around and heading back the way we came.

I watch him for a second, expecting him to start booking it like Lia was, but instead he takes his time, moseying along like he's in the middle of one of the old Westerns my dad used to watch.

Which only makes me appreciate Mekhi more. He's willing to give Lia and me some privacy, but he's in no hurry to leave me alone with anyone. Even another vampire.

"So what's been going on with you?" I ask Lia after another glance at my phone reveals still no texts from Jaxon. And the fact that we have two minutes left to get to class.

"Pretty sure that's my line after that whole scene in the lounge today." She raises her brows in a WTF look.

"Oh, that. Um, Jaxon..." I trail off, not sure what I can possibly say about what happened.

Lia laughs. "You don't have to explain anything to me. Hudson was overprotective in the same way, doing whatever he thought necessary to take care of me. Even if there was nothing to protect me from."

I think about correcting her, maybe even telling her what's been going on so I can get her take on it, but we're almost to the cottages, and suddenly more people are around—vampires, witches, *and* shifters. And since there's more than enough gossip surrounding me right now, I figure the last thing I need to do is add fuel to the fire.

So instead of letting Lia know everything that's happened over the last few days, I just kind of shrug and laugh. "You know

how guys are.”

“Yeah, I do.” She rolls her eyes. “Which reminds me...I was thinking you might want to get away from all that machismo for a while. Want to do a girls’ night tonight? We can do facials, watch some rom-com, eat too much chocolate. Maybe even do those mani-pedis we were talking about the other day.”

“Oh.” I sneak another glance at my phone. Still no Jaxon. Maybe my uncle banished him to Prague—or Siberia—after all. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Wow.” She gives me a mock-offended look. “Don’t sound so enthusiastic.”

“Sorry. I was just hoping Jaxon would ask me to spend some time with him tonight. But—” I hold up my phone with a sigh. “Nothing so far.”

“Yeah, well. Don’t hold your breath. Making plans isn’t exactly Jaxon’s modus operandi.” There’s a sadness running underneath the bitterness in her voice when she talks about him. It makes me think that, despite what she says, she misses his friendship as much as he misses hers.

Which sucks, especially considering how much the two of them are hurting right now.

It’s not my place to get involved—I didn’t know Hudson and I wasn’t around when things went bad between Jaxon and Lia—but I know how fleeting life can be, even for vampires. How quickly things can just end, with no warning and no chance to put everything right.

I also know how much his problems with Lia weigh on Jaxon, reminding him daily of his role in what happened to Hudson. I can’t help wondering if those problems weigh just as heavily on Lia...and if maybe the two of them might finally begin to heal if they can forgive each other and themselves.

I mean, anything has to be better than this enmity between

them. She's destroyed, he's devastated, and neither of them can move into the future because they're so traumatized by the past.

Which is why, in the end, I can't resist saying, "You know, he really misses you."

Her eyes jump to mine. "You don't know what you're talking about." It's a half whisper, half hiss.

"I do know. He told me what happened. And I can't imagine how hurt you must be—"

"You're right. You can't imagine." She starts walking faster as we head up the final incline. "So don't."

"Okay. Sorry." I'm practically running in an effort to keep up with her. "It's just, I think you would be better off if you could try to connect with Jaxon a little bit. Or anyone, really, Lia. I know you're sad; I know you just want to be left alone because everything else is too agonizing to even think about. Believe me, I know that." God, do I ever.

"But the thing is," I continue, "you aren't getting any better like that. You're staying exactly where you were, drowning in grief, and until you decide to take the first step, you're always going to be drowning."

"What do you think I was doing when I invited you over for facials?" she asks, her voice smaller than I've ever heard it. "I'm tired of crying myself to sleep every night, Grace. I'm tired of hurting. That's why I thought I could try to start over with you. You're nice, and you didn't know Hudson or the person I used to be. I thought we had a chance of being friends. Real friends."

She turns her face away from mine, but I can still tell she's biting her lip, obviously trying not to cry. I feel like a total jerk. "Of course we're friends, Lia." Impulsively, I wrap an arm around her shoulders and squeeze.

She stiffens up at first, but eventually she relaxes and leans

into the hug. I used to be one of those people who never let go of the hug first—right up until my parents died. Then I got so many hugs I didn’t want from well-meaning people who didn’t know what else to do that backing away became self-preservation.

For Lia, I go back to the pre-accident time, hugging her until she decides it’s enough. It takes longer than I thought it would, which, in my mind, proves the theory that you hold on until the other person pulls away because you never know what they’re going through and if they need the comfort.

Of course, my phone chooses to *finally* vibrate right in the middle of the hug, and it takes every ounce of self-control I have not to make a grab for it. But real friends are important—not to mention few and far between—so I wait it out, not letting go until Lia finally steps back.

My phone vibrates three more times, stops, then vibrates again. Lia rolls her eyes, but in a friendly way that says the storm has passed. “Why don’t you answer that and put Jaxon out of his misery? He’s probably terrified the shifters decided to have barbecued Grace for lunch despite his warning.”

She must be right, because two more texts come in before I can pull my phone out. Lia just laughs and shakes her head. “How the mighty have fallen.”

Not going to lie, my heart skips a beat—or five—at hearing her say that, even if there’s a part of me that’s afraid it’s wishful thinking. Still, it’s hard not to smile when I look at the string of texts he’s sent me.

Jaxon: Told you not to worry

Jaxon: I have lived to fight another day

Jaxon: Or should that be I have lived to bite another day...

Jaxon: Anyway, come to my room tonight, whenever you’re available

Jaxon: I want to show you something

Partly because he contacted me as soon as he was done with Uncle Finn.

And (mostly) because he asked me out tonight. Or as close to out as we can get here in the middle of Alaska.

Me: Sorry, talking to Lia

Me: Definitely! What time?

Me: Glad things went okay

I hesitate for a second, then text what I've been thinking since he made the pun about living to bite another day. It's the same thing I've been thinking about off and on since I left his room a couple of hours ago.

Me: I like it when you bite

I blush a little as I send it, but I don't regret it. Because it's the truth and because I've already thrown myself at the boy. What else is there but to see it through to the end?

When my phone vibrates immediately, I'm almost afraid to look at it.

Afraid I've gone too far.

Afraid I'm pushing too fast.

Jaxon: Good, because I like the way you taste

It's corny and unoriginal and that doesn't matter at all, because *swoon*. For a boy who tries to be so implacable, Jaxon's got serious game. I mean, really. What girl is supposed to resist a text like that? Or the guy who texted it, when he's also the guy willing to fight wolves and dragons and anyone else who comes for her?

Not me, that's for sure.

Lia, on the other hand, makes a little gagging sound as she reads over my shoulder. "Wow, Jaxon. Sappy much?"

"I like it." Still, I blank out my phone screen and shove it back into my pocket. No need for her to see anything else Jaxon might decide to write to me.

I tingle a little at the thought.

“So we raincheck tonight?” Lia says as she pushes open the door to the art studio. “And do facials tomorrow?”

It sounds like a plan to me. But after everything she just revealed, I can’t help asking, “Are you sure? I can go see Jaxon after we have our girls’ night.”

“And make me the one responsible for standing in the way of true love?” she snarks. “I don’t think so.”

“Oh, it’s not like that,” I tell her, even as a part of me melts at the description. “We’re just...hanging out.”

“Wanna bet?” Lia asks with a snort. “Because the Jaxon Vega I’ve known my whole life doesn’t almost start a war over a girl he just wants to ‘hang out’ with.”